The Black Earth

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The House of Clocks

The house stood in a bend of the Volga, where the land sloped in quiet resignation toward the water and the snow settled year after year without protest. It was built of pale timber blackened with age, its corners joined by iron nails hand-hammered by men long buried. Beneath the outer beams, a stone foundation held its breath against the frost. The structure leaned slightly westward, not from failure, but from having endured too many winters. Even the roof sagged like a veteran's shoulders, bearing the weight of too many snows without complaint.

Inside, it was always cold, even in months when the river softened and the crows grew restless in the trees. The chill came not from the wind or poor construction, but from the house itself — from its memory, its silence, its habits. The rooms were narrow, their ceilings low. The floors creaked in certain patterns, as though responding only to familiar steps. Each plank had been scrubbed so many times the grain had worn smooth beneath the passage of disciplined feet. The walls bore no softness, only the hardness of presence — vertical planes of faded plaster painted with lime and smoke.

An iron stove dominated the main room, broad and square like a sentinel in black. It hissed and ticked as it cooled, making a sound like the winding of an invisible clock. At night, the stove's sides glowed faintly, its heat bleeding slowly into the room like memory. A narrow chimney traced up through the beams and carried the smoke out into the dull white sky. The smell of the house was constant — pine wax, coal soot, and the slow sweetness of old linen stored in cedar chests. The scent of women had long gone. What remained was masculine, quiet, and clean.

The windows were narrow and set deep into the walls, framed with thick ledges worn by elbows. In winter, they filmed with breath, and the frost grew inward in patterns that looked like writing. Through those glass panes the outside world seemed distant, muffled — just enough snow, just enough silence to make it seem as though time itself had stopped at the edge of the property. The candlelight reflected in the glass at dusk, and when Matvey was a boy, he sometimes mistook the flickering for a star.

Icons hung above every door. Some were dark with age, their gold leaf dulled, their saints' faces almost gone with the smoke of old prayers. But they were never removed. Dust was brushed from them once a month, and a candle was lit below them on feast days. Higher than the icons, placed where only eyes could reach, hung the portraits of generals — Matvey's grandfather in full cuirassier uniform, a tsarist campaign officer beneath glass, and one unknown man with the hard eyes of command. It was understood that these portraits watched the house more faithfully than any living man. They looked down upon meals, upon childhood punishments, upon silent evenings when no one dared speak above the turning of a page.

This was the world Matvey was born into — not soft, not cruel, but shaped by discipline and the presence of those who came before. A house not meant for laughter, but for silence. A house that stood as if it had always been there, waiting for sons to grow into men and vanish into wars, leaving behind nothing but their boots by the door and the silence they had learned to carry.

Mornings in that house began without speech. The day rose through sound — the muffled scrape of a chair, the small cough of his father near the stove, the faint chime of the samovar lid as water began to boil. The frost on the inside of the windows caught the first pale light, turning the panes into sheets of dull silver. Matvey would wake to that glow and to the steady rhythm of the house itself, as if the timbers were breathing in their own slow ritual.

Meals were taken at the same table his grandfather had built — heavy oak, the color of smoke, its surface worn thin where generations of hands had rested in prayer before bread. No words were exchanged once food was served. His father did not look up when eating, and Matvey had learned early that silence at the table was not an act of sternness, but of reverence. Each motion had its order: the breaking of bread, the measured sip of tea, the setting down of utensils so that metal would not clatter. Afterward, his father would wipe the crumbs from the cloth with slow, precise fingers and nod once to signal the meal was over. That nod meant more than speech.

By the hearth, a pair of felt slippers waited for him each evening, aligned neatly on the same board of floor, their edges touching like two sleeping animals. It was one of the few traces of tenderness left from his mother, who had once arranged them by the warmth before bed. She had gone when he was six — fever, they said, though he barely remembered her face. Only her scent of linen and winter apples lingered in the cedar chests. In memory, she existed not as a woman but as a softness the house had since forgotten.

The hallway creaked with every step, not as complaint but as acknowledgment. The boards spoke to those who walked upon them — one low groan by the stairwell, one high whine by the door. Matvey used to listen to those sounds at night, lying still beneath his thin blanket, tracing where his father moved below without ever seeing him. That sound was his lullaby.

In the attic, his bed was narrow and set beneath the rafters where the roof dipped low. Through a small square window he could see the church spire rising beyond the birch trees. At dusk, the bells would ring across the frozen river, each tone arriving slower than the last, as if weighed down by distance. He would count them — not out of piety, but because the sound felt like time itself. Sometimes he imagined the bells were calling to the snow, asking it to keep falling, to cover everything that still remembered warmth.

He would fall asleep watching the dim red pulse of the stove below seep through the cracks of the floorboards, listening to the sighs of an old house that never dreamed, only endured.

Clothing in the Kireyev household was not fashion, but function. It spoke in layers, in textures, in the way seams were reinforced and cuffs stitched by hand, not for show but so they might outlast another winter. His father's coat was made of thick gray wool, the color of

dry stone, patched at the elbows and lined with sheepskin that had yellowed with years. It smelled of pipe smoke and sweat — not the sweat of labor, but of endurance. The collar stood high, stiffened from so many seasons turned up against the wind, and its buttons were of brass, dulled by fingers that never fidgeted.

Matvey's own garments were simpler, but made with the same care. Homespun shirts of rough flax, softened over time, with embroidered cuffs in blue and black thread — not decorative, but traditional, passed from his mother's hands to the local seamstress after her death. The patterns were modest, geometric, northern. Their meaning had been explained once — protection, good harvest, quiet strength — but Matvey wore them without thought, only noticing how the thread stayed warm against his wrist when the wind sliced through the shutters.

Their trousers were heavy wool, dark and coarse, often tucked into boots that bore the weight of inheritance. The boots had belonged to his grandfather, then his father, and now to him. They had been resoled countless times, the leather cracked and softened to the shape of the family's gait. When Matvey walked, he carried the echo of their steps, and when he stood still, the boots stood with the quiet of old memory.

Hats in the winter were tall and dark, made from felt or fur depending on the fortune of the year. Gloves were knitted by the wives of local men, traded for bread or salt. Scarves were worn tucked tightly beneath coat collars — not as adornment but as necessity, wrapped three times to keep the chest from freezing.

Their serfs wore similar garb, though coarser, patched more visibly, and often without the insulation the Kireyevs could afford. Yet the distinction was not worn in thread alone. It was in posture. In the way a man removed his hat when passing through the outer gate, or how he waited for the master to speak first in springtime gatherings. Even so, the boundary between landowner and peasant was thin. They were not nobles with estates; they were custodians of old soil, respected but not rich.

In winter, Matvey would watch the serfs walk past the barn, shoulders hunched, scarves tied tight around hollow faces. He did not think them beneath him. They shared the same earth, the same sky, the same silence. If there was a difference, it lay in the number of names remembered at the church altar. Nobility, in this house, was not pride — it was debt. To command was to answer for more lives than your own.

The clothing of the household carried this truth: to be warm was not comfort, it was survival. And what one wore in the world was not to be noticed, but to disappear into the season with dignity.

When he was alone — which was often — Matvey would lie on the attic bed and listen not for sounds, but for memory. It came in voices that no longer lived, and yet they spoke plainly in his mind, without need of lips or breath. His grandfather's voice most of all. Gravel-thick, low like the rumble of cart wheels on frozen earth, shaped by years of shouting over the noise of cannons and wind.

The stories had been few, but each one was permanent. Not told for drama, but for instruction — not a theater of war, but a discipline. He remembered sitting at the man's feet while the stove cracked behind him, watching the coal glow on the poker as his grandfather traced its edge in the air like a sword. "You hold the line not with courage," the old man had said, "but with duty. You do not die for glory. You die because someone must."

These words settled in Matvey like iron filings in water. They gave shape to everything — how he stood, how he listened, how he watched snow fall in silence rather than speak needlessly. Affection was not common in that house. No one reached to tousle a boy's hair or asked how he felt when the mornings burned his fingers raw. The warmth that existed was ritual, not comfort — a chair left near the stove, a slice of black bread spread with lard after the day's labor, a candle lit near the icon of Saint George. It was enough.

But even as a boy, he understood that love here was not something spoken. It was what remained after obedience. His father loved him, perhaps — but only in the way one might love a saber: kept clean, kept sharp, expected to serve. And Matvey did not resent that. He did not yearn for what he had never seen. He simply carried the weight.

He would lie in bed with his hands folded behind his head, staring at the dark beams above him, and think not of games or laughter, but of duty. Not of childhood, but of preparation. There was no soft future imagined, no dream of escape. Only the steady pull of something vast and unseen drawing him forward through time.

When he heard the word "Russia," even then, it stirred nothing like joy. It did not mean parades or poets, songs or heroes. It meant weight. Cold weight. Like snow that keeps falling long after the roofs have bowed. Like the shape of his father's back when he knelt before the family icon and did not rise until the candle burned out.

"Russia," he would whisper in his thoughts, not as a place, but as something watching. Something old and close, like breath against his neck. He did not know what it was, only that it was waiting — and that when it called, he would go.

Not because he wanted to. Because he must.

The snow had fallen all morning, slow and steady, laying its hush over every fencepost, every bare branch, every step. By afternoon, the fields around the estate stretched out like pages left blank, soft drifts undisturbed but for the single trail Matvey had carved with his boots. He walked without hurry, gloved hands clasped behind his back, the cold settling into his bones not as pain but as presence. The wind was light, enough to whisper through the grass that still rose stiffly in patches where the frost had not yet crushed it.

The sky hung low, a flat silver dome with no sun, only a pale brightness that made the snow glow from within. There was no sound but the hush of wind brushing across his ears and the soft crunch of his boots pressing into the white crust. Even the crows were absent today, and the dogs near the barns had gone silent.

He walked until the house was a shadow behind him, until the woods on the far side of the property rose like a black fringe against the world. Then he stopped.

Ahead of him, a single tree stood alone — a black silhouette, twisted and bare, its limbs stretched like fingers toward the indifferent sky. It had been struck by lightning years ago and never healed, never died. It simply remained, scorched and firm, a scar made of bark. Around it the snow deepened, untouched by footsteps, like a moat of silence.

Matvey stared at it for a long time. He did not move closer. He did not sit. He only watched it, the way a soldier watches a figure on the far end of the battlefield — unsure if it is friend, foe, or merely shadow.

Something in him stirred, a feeling without a name. It rose not from his heart, but from deeper — from the same place where he felt the rhythm of the house, the weight of his family's coats, the voice of his grandfather still echoing through walls that no longer breathed.

Then, into the open air, he whispered,
"Are you watching?"

The words disappeared the moment they left him, taken by the wind, buried under the snow before they could be heard. He did not repeat them. He did not wait for an answer.

He turned and walked back toward the house, his shape growing smaller against the white as the black tree remained — tall, alone, and listening.

Steel and Scripture

Moscow in winter was a labyrinth of smoke and snow, its avenues choked with carriages and boot prints, its air thick with the breath of coal and sermons. The city loomed — not upward like Petersburg's noble facades, but inward, like an ancient cathedral closed around its own heart. Each building seemed built not to inspire, but to endure. The soot on the stones had turned them the color of mourning, and the windows of passing homes reflected only gray skies and the weary steps of men bound to purpose.

The cadet school was tucked within high stone walls near the old quarter, hemmed in by gates that creaked with age and disapproval. It resembled not an academy, but a barracks set down by accident in the middle of a city too preoccupied to notice. The gate bore the imperial crest, but the crows perched atop it seemed to mock the double-headed eagle, their black eyes more permanent than any emblem.

Inside, the halls were clean but bare, lined with cracked portraits of long-dead instructors and faded flags that drooped as if exhausted by the weight of time. The floors smelled of wax, ink, and boiled linen. Boys marched through them not as students, but as initiates. Each morning began with inspection — boots aligned under cots, hands straight to the seam of the

trousers, collar buttons fastened even in sleep. Silence was not requested; it was enforced. When the bell rang, voices vanished.

Matvey arrived in his fifteenth year, carrying only a wooden trunk, a sheaf of documents from his father's regiment, and the slow, quiet resolve that had been pressed into him since infancy. He did not speak to the other boys. He had learned long ago that words meant less than posture. Instead, he watched — how one boy cried after lights-out, how another flinched when an officer approached, how a third scribbled prayers between Latin drills. There were many sons here, but few men.

The chapel stood at the far end of the courtyard, its doors never locked, though few dared enter except on feast days or funerals. It was a square, dark place of gray stone and dark gold — the kind of sacred that did not comfort, only remind. Inside, the icons wept in their stillness. The candles burned low and left streaks of wax along the iron sconces like scars. The altar cloth smelled of damp wool, and the air held the sharp trace of incense and mildew. When Matvey knelt, it was not to seek blessing. It was to be near silence — the only place in the school where even the masters did not raise their voices.

Discipline here was not sharpened — it was already sharp, and boys merely bled upon it. The instructors spoke like officers in a siege, their words clipped, their patience spent. Every lesson was barked through frostbitten mornings, and every mistake cost: a day without fire, a supper denied, an hour standing in the snow until your thoughts blurred and your breath came in glass.

Yet Matvey did not flinch. He took to it as a blade takes to a whetstone — not willingly, but inevitably. The world had always felt like this to him: cold, gray, waiting to be endured. The school only made it official.

The cadet school was known formally as the Moscow First Cadet Corps, though among its students it was simply called *the Corps*. Founded by imperial decree and shaped in the image of Catherine's old Enlightenment dreams, it had long since become more iron than ivory — less a cradle of intellect than a forge of obedience. The building itself rose with stately severity beside the Yauza, its broad wings flanked by gates trimmed in rust and frost. Its courtyards echoed with marching steps, its halls with the silence of boys too well trained to ask questions.

The cadet uniform was a kind of armor. Stiff with starch, the dark blue wool held creases like iron, and the high collar pressed against the jaw so tightly that one learned to speak with the spine, not the throat. Boots were shined each night until the leather reflected light like a dark mirror. Buttons of polished iron were arranged in strict rows, and in winter, they burned cold against the skin when fastened in haste. Matvey grew used to the hiss of breath when the brass met flesh at dawn, and the quick, muffled curses boys whispered when their fingers numbed too fast to fasten properly.

The barracks were arranged by company — some for sons of titled men, others for the children of officers, and a few reserved for orphans of the fallen. Matvey's placement was

quiet but firm: a room for sons of service, where pride did not glitter but held firm beneath the weight of silence. Each cadet was given a single cot, a desk with an inkwell and drawer, and a small crucifix nailed to the wall. The crucifixes varied in style — some crude, some delicate — but no boy dared remove them. They were not there for comfort, but to remind: God watches, and expects silence.

The institution itself was orderly and fully contained. There was a gymnasium with vaulted ceilings and frozen breath in the mornings, where fencing masters barked drills like generals. A lazaret stood near the back courtyard for broken bones and winter fevers. The dining hall served bread from its own ovens, always warm but never soft. The classrooms were the finest in Moscow, with glass cabinets housing rare volumes, globes marked with imperial ambition, and maps where the black ink of distant provinces spread like veins.

Boys were trained not only to fight, but to move among society — to bow, to dance, to converse without shame. In addition to drills and Latin, they learned the correct angle of a head nod at court, the posture of waiting beside a lady's chair, the proper response to a general's offhand remark. It was not learning; it was molding.

In the summers, they marched to old monasteries, visited battlefields, hiked through pine forests where insects clung to their collars, and recited poetry beside ancient stones. They were told this was Russia — that its soil was their teacher, that its rivers whispered history. But to Matvey, even then, it felt like a lesson meant for others. The land did not speak to him as a citizen. It watched him like a father appraising a silent son.

He wore the uniform well. Not proudly, but correctly. The fabric itched. The buttons stung. But each morning, when he looked at his reflection in the black-polished boots, he saw a boy disappearing — and something heavier beginning to take shape.

Matvey distinguished himself not by brilliance, nor by charm, but by his capacity to endure. Where others strained to impress or collapsed under scrutiny, he simply endured — without flair, without failure. There were boys who could dance with noble ease, who could quote Latin like breath, who drew the eye of instructors with natural brightness or polished obedience. Matvey did none of that. He did not shine, he endured. And the instructors, over time, began to respect him for that more than they respected the others.

Fencing practice began before the frost had lifted from the courtyard walls. The boys stood in two ranks, sabers in gloved hands, steam rising from their mouths in ragged bursts. The master barked corrections in a bored tone, striking calves with a cane when a lunge failed, when a parry was late. Matvey never flinched. His footwork was slow at first, deliberate, but unbreakable. He would not dazzle in a duel, but in war, he would not fall first. One instructor noted, not aloud but in margin, *strong spine, no vanity — reliable.* That was enough.

At night, prayers were recited in the chapel by candlelight. The heat barely reached the boys' fingers, and the pages of their Psalters shivered with the draft. The wax burned low and flickered on the faces of saints painted in gold leaf. Matvey's voice was quiet, paced, without flourish. He did not speak to God as a supplicant but as a person who had learned not to beg.

He kneeled longer than the others, not out of piety, but because silence suited him more than rest.

In the classroom, calligraphy drills filled the early hours. Ink stained his fingers, and sometimes his cuffs, though never his desk. The instructors rarely corrected him — his handwriting lacked grace, but it was exact. He wrote as he lived: clearly, unsentimentally, without waste. Maps, orders, records — all came to him easily, because they made sense. He preferred the company of ink to the stumbling noise of conversation.

In the courtyard, under sky gray with soot or snow, the hours that followed were given to the body. Physical drills, relentless and without ornament, carved the rhythm of each day like chisel on stone. They ran laps around the perimeter of the school until their lungs burned and their boots steamed in the frost. Push-ups until arms quivered, then held still. Pull-ups on the iron bars bolted into the brick walls, palms blistering, breath sharp. The air was full of shouted counts, the bark of commands, the crack of switches against stone when someone faltered. Their bodies became machines of repetition — joints stiff, backs straight, sweat turning to ice on collars.

Gymnastics were taught without smiles. Vaults over wooden horses, climbs up rope walls that offered no grip. If one cadet failed, the whole company began again. Matvey did not fail. He was not the strongest, but he did not break. He moved with the stubborn precision of someone who accepted pain as a form of order. Muscles ached, bruises bloomed, but he made no sound.

Sometimes, when mistakes were made, or when discipline slipped even briefly, beatings followed. Not out of cruelty — that was the school's defense — but out of necessity. Elder officers delivered the blows without anger, without expression, as if they were part of the drill. A cane across the back, a blow to the jaw, a boot to the ribs. Matvey never looked away when others were struck. And when it was his turn, which came rarely, he did not flinch. Pain was not shame. It was reminder.

He did not resent the body for its suffering. He treated it like another tool to be sharpened. Blood could be cleaned. Breath would return. The point was to endure.

And in enduring, he came to understand something the lectures never taught: that in silence, in repetition, in pain measured and controlled, there was a kind of truth.

Not meaning. Not glory.

Just the discipline that held him upright.

At night, in the long dormitories, the sounds of weeping were muffled under blankets. Boys who missed their homes. Boys who feared the next inspection. Boys who had come from affection and now lived without it. Matvey heard them. Always. But he never turned his head. He stared instead at the ceiling, arms folded across his chest, eyes unblinking until sleep came.

He did not despise their softness. He simply did not believe in it.

There was no comfort in sympathy, no reward in shared tears. He had learned from his father — and from the long silences of the house in Yaroslavl — that a man's soul grows straight only in cold soil.

And so he watched the others break and mend themselves in the dark, while he remained still, as if preparing not for rank, nor glory, but simply for a life that would demand everything and explain nothing.

It came to him by accident — slipped into a stack of geography texts left on the instructor's desk, its spine unmarked, its title page torn. He opened it out of idle habit, expecting a tract on rivers or grain, but the words within struck differently. The paper was coarse, the ink uneven, but the tone was unmistakable — seditious, careful, burning under its calmness. A treatise written not by a foreign thinker, but a Russian one — the name obscured, perhaps deliberately.

Matvey read only four pages that morning, yet they echoed in him like an iron dropped in a still pond.

"The state survives not by God's blessing," it claimed, "but by the fear of its absence."

He folded the pages closed, slid the book under his coat, and returned to his barracks without a word. That night, after lights-out, he read further by the faint light of the snow reflecting through the windowpane. He read slowly, cautiously, as though each sentence was a step out onto a frozen lake.

"The Tsar is a symbol — but symbols devour men."

That line he read three times, then tucked the book beneath his pillow, pressing his head against it as though he could smother the thought into silence.

But it did not leave him.

For weeks after, the words stirred like cinders beneath everything. During fencing drills, he heard them again — *obedience is not loyalty; it is the silence of survival.* When the priest intoned blessings in the chapel, Matvey's gaze drifted to the painted dome above and he thought, *we kneel not to God, but to the need to kneel.*

At first, he resisted. He reminded himself of his father's voice, the stories of his grandfather, the old conviction that Russia was strength made visible. But some part of him, silent and still, whispered otherwise.

"Have I ever chosen anything?" he thought one night, staring at the crucifix above his cot. "Or have I only stepped into the places carved for me by dead men?"

He did not answer aloud. He did not dare.

Instead, he kept the book hidden — not out of fear of punishment, but because it was too much to speak of. It had not given him new beliefs. It had only opened the space where belief once sat, and showed him the cold beneath it.

He still recited the Psalms. He still polished his boots. But something inside him no longer saluted without question.

“I was born to serve,” he thought. “But now I wonder — serve whom? The land? The name? Or the hand that holds the chain?”

No one noticed the change. It was small. Quiet. Like the shift of a river beneath ice — unseen, but certain.

And beneath his pillow, each night, the book waited.

Snow fell in silence against the monastery wall, thick and slow, clinging to the whitewashed stones until the entire structure seemed carved from the very sky. It was the season’s first true storm, and the courtyard behind the chapel had emptied quickly after morning drills. Only Matvey remained, standing under the overhang of the cloister, his gloved hands resting behind his back, eyes fixed on the way the flakes piled in the corners of the cracked stones.

No footsteps remained in the snow. Even the priests had vanished into their cells. He stood alone, watching the world grow softer, quieter, heavier.

“This is Russia,” he thought.

Not the uniform. Not the oath. Not the Tsar’s name stitched in gold thread. Not even the lines drawn on maps or the chants sung before battle. No, it was this: the weight of snowfall on stone, the quiet that covered centuries, the breath of earth beneath stillness.

He blinked slowly, and the thought came clear, not as a question, but as something remembered — as though it had always been in him, waiting.

“A place has no borders if it breathes through you.”

The idea startled him by its simplicity. He whispered it again inwardly, to test its shape, and felt no doubt.

The state might command, punish, parade. But Russia — the real Russia — did not need to declare itself. It was not written in law, nor hung from banners. It was the tree line at dusk. The grain fields still bowed under snow. It was blood, yes, but not spilled for empire. Blood born in the land and returned to it.

“Russia is not the Tsar,” he thought. “Nor the general. Nor the flag. It is something older. Something that does not care whether I kneel or march. It is watching. Always. Waiting for me to see it.”

He turned toward the chapel, toward the wall where frost crept across the icon of St. Sergius above the door. The saint's face was blurred with age, but the eyes remained. They did not command. They only endured.

And in that moment, Matvey felt it more clearly than any order he had ever received — a sense that what demanded his loyalty was not power, but presence. Not command, but memory.

He drew in a slow breath, watching it rise in the cold.

"I am yours," he said silently. "Not because you ask. Because you are."

The snow continued to fall. No bells rang. No voice answered.

But still, something within him bowed.

By the early 1850s, the Russian Empire stood vast and solemn, its reach spanning from the Carpathian Mountains to the distant shores of Kamchatka, from the icy stillness of the White Sea to the warm dust of Central Asia. This immense realm, unparalleled in size and diversity, moved to the rhythm of tradition — a continuity that many believed to be its strength. At its center sat Tsar Nicholas I, a ruler shaped by the iron of military order and the weight of dynastic duty. Stern in demeanor and resolute in vision, he saw himself not only as sovereign, but as steward — of stability, of faith, and of a sacred inheritance passed through centuries.

The Russia of Nicholas I was a fortress of unity. Serfdom bound the peasantry to the soil, maintaining the agricultural backbone of the empire. The Church remained a guiding presence, offering moral clarity and spiritual cohesion to a people scattered across vast landscapes. The state emphasized discipline and structure, seeking harmony through obedience and reverence. While Western Europe embraced rapid change — sometimes at the cost of upheaval — Nicholas held fast to the pillars of continuity, seeking to protect Russia from the storms that had shaken other thrones. He believed that order brought peace, and that in preserving the empire, he was safeguarding something timeless.

But the storm approached.

The Ottoman Empire, that decaying rival to the south, had grown weaker by the year — and both Britain and France circled it like vultures sensing meat. Russia moved to extend its influence over the Holy Lands, cloaking its ambitions in the language of protecting Orthodox Christians. The West saw a land-grab. Nicholas saw a crusade. Diplomacy faltered. Threats turned to posturing, and posturing became war.

In 1853, Russian troops marched into the Danubian Principalities. By 1854, Britain and France had declared war. What had begun as a question of shrines and treaties became a firestorm on the shores of the Black Sea. The Crimean Peninsula became the center of the empire's pride and its humiliation.

Inside the empire, the condition was dire even before the first cannon was fired. The army, though vast, was sluggish, poorly equipped, and led by generals chosen more for loyalty than

brilliance. Muskets misfired. Orders traveled by horseback. Uniforms were issued without boots. The Russian soldier was brave — that no one denied — but he stood with bread instead of bullets and prayed for warmth more often than for victory.

And yet, amid the rusting bureaucracy and frozen parades, a generation of men like Matvey were rising. Trained not for comfort, but for burden. They did not question the empire's direction — not yet. But they would march into the war carrying with them the weight of a nation that called itself holy, yet left its people in silence.

The world was changing. Steam moved ships now. Telegraphs carried thoughts faster than soldiers could ride. But in Russia, the clocks ticked slow, and the bells rang for a time that had already passed.

And still, they marched.

Orders of Dust and Blood

Matvey rode at the head of his column with the stillness of a man who had accepted discomfort long ago. The road stretched southward through frozen earth, then mud, then dust — as if the land itself were changing skin in preparation for something it could not name. Villages passed like echoes: clusters of thatched roofs sunk into the ground as though the people had grown tired of standing upright. Smoke rose from crooked chimneys. Chickens wandered freely through the roads. Dogs watched without barking.

The peasants bowed when they saw the uniforms. Not deeply, not reverently — only as much as the spine would permit. They stood in the furrows of their fields, hands calloused, eyes shaded by scarves and habit. They did not speak unless spoken to. And even then, they gave answers as short as the daylight.

Matvey wore a tailored officer's coat with brass buttons that no longer shone. Dust had dulled its blue, and the sun had stiffened the seams. But it still marked him as one of those who gave orders and slept apart. The soldiers behind him marched in file, rifles slung, boots uneven. Their coats were of coarse gray wool, patched and misfitted, their belts pulling hard against ribs that hadn't seen meat in weeks.

He listened to their steps more than to their words. They did not sing. Only the sound of breath and leather. The occasional cough. The sigh of a foot slipping in mud. Some were peasant boys conscripted from villages like the ones they now passed. Others were veterans — hollow-eyed, backs bowed by years in barracks, men who had learned to sleep anywhere and regret nothing.

The hierarchy was visible not just in fabric, but in flesh. Officers rode. Soldiers walked. Officers carried maps. Soldiers carried one another, when needed. At camp, officers dined on hard cheese, tinned fish, bread wrapped in paper. Soldiers gnawed old roots and called it

stew. When snow fell, it landed equally on all shoulders. But warmth, boots, tobacco — those flowed upward.

Still, discipline held. Orders were passed down without delay, obeyed without protest. The fear of punishment and the weight of repetition kept men from breaking. And yet, Matvey began to notice small hesitations — a boot not polished, a salute half-raised, the way some men stared too long at the horizon before moving. They were not disloyal. They were already tired.

From horseback, he surveyed the passing countryside. The steeples were leaning. The fences made from old wagon wheels. Icons painted on barn doors, half-faded, still watched the road. Somewhere ahead lay Crimea. And between him and it, miles of dust, blood, and the slow erosion of everything that made a man more than a body in motion.

He did not pity them. Pity softens command. But he felt something stir in him — not affection, but recognition.

"They are bowed," he thought. "Not because they were broken, but because they were never taught how to stand."

The camp smelled of sweat and ink — old leather straps gone sour with use, wool cloaks hung too long in the damp, and the faint chemical bite of dried ink from the quartermaster's tent where requisitions were scratched out in haste and often ignored. Horses stood tethered in rows just beyond the picket lines, their breath rising in soft clouds as they shifted on frozen ground. The light was low, the hour not yet dawn, and the world held that brittle stillness that comes just before things are ordered to move.

Matvey stood with his gloves behind his back, posture straight, boots sunk a little into the thawing earth. Around him, other officers gathered in a loose arc as General Khitrovo sat atop his bay horse and gestured broadly with a gloved hand, his voice cutting the morning air.

"You are not marching to show flags!" the general barked, his mustache stiff with frost. "You are not carrying Russia's pride in your pockets! You are to deliver order — with rifle, with blade, with the dignity of your rank!"

Some officers nodded, others shifted weight. Matvey kept his gaze forward but his eyes wandered past the general — over his shoulder, beyond the lines of tents, to the rolling hills beyond. The land there was pale, dry, stripped of snow but not yet green. Fallow fields waited without protest. A single black tree stood alone in the distance, its limbs stiff like fingers raised not in warning, but in quiet accusation.

"We must show these peasants," Khitrovo continued, "that we are not wandering beggars. That the Tsar's men move with purpose!"

Matvey's jaw tightened, but he said nothing.

"Purpose," he thought. *"If we have it, it has not been named."*

Beside him, a young officer with flushed cheeks and nervous hands leaned slightly and whispered, “Do you believe him? About the peasants needing to see our dignity?”

Matvey did not look at him. “They’ll see our boots before they see our dignity.”

The younger man exhaled a dry laugh but quickly straightened as Khitrovo’s gaze swept over the line.

“Your men will rise in one hour. Packs ready. Inspections complete. We move south by second bell.”

The general turned his mount with a clatter of hooves and rode off between the tents, a trail of steam and dust rising behind him.

Matvey remained a moment longer, eyes still fixed on that distant tree.

“Every man here marches because another man tells him to,” he thought. *“But the land tells us nothing. And I trust the silence more.”*

He turned then, coat flaring slightly in the wind, and walked back through the rows of tents where men still slept, unaware of the next piece of ground they’d be told to cross.

The road wound through towns that bore no names worth recording. They came and went like old men dozing in the sun—silent, slow, half-forgotten even by those born within them. Matvey rode through them at the head of his unit, the hooves of his horse stirring up dust where, only weeks before, there had been frost. He did not dismount. There was nothing here to greet, nothing to fear.

Faded Orthodox churches slouched at the center of each settlement, their onion domes stained black by years of wood smoke and rain, streaked where snow had melted again and again into the walls. The crosses on top tilted eastward as if bowing to some older, crueler force. Some chapels were locked, others open to wind and birds. He saw no priests. Only candles burned low and forgotten near broken icons, their wax pooled like tears beneath painted saints.

Fences lined the dirt paths — not straight, not planned, but crooked and tired, made from mismatched planks and bound with old rope. They leaned like the backs of the peasants behind them, hunched from labor, bent by more than age.

A woman passed carrying a bucket, her scarf pulled tight around her face, her eyes not meeting his. A child stared from behind a barn door, neither curious nor afraid — only still. Dogs barked once, then stopped. In one village, a man raised two fingers in what might have been a blessing or a warning.

“These are the people we are meant to defend,” muttered Lieutenant Yegor beside him, his voice low, eyes scanning the crumbling huts. “And this is what we defend them with — boots full of holes and a general who thinks we’re made of banners.”

“They don’t care who defends them,” Matvey replied without turning. “Only that we pass through without taking too much.”

He thought of the general’s voice from the previous morning, rising above the wind like a sermon. *‘You march with the soul of the Empire behind you!’*

No, Matvey thought now, *we march with mud at our heels and orders written by men who’ve never touched it.*

There was a widening gap between what they were told and what they saw. The Tsar’s proclamations spoke of duty, honor, glory — yet here, in the belly of the Empire, roofs caved in and walls wept with mildew. The Empire did not walk these streets. It passed over them, unseen.

His eyes rested on a chapel door, hanging by one hinge, its icons faded to the color of ash. For a moment, he imagined the Tsar himself standing there, in his medals and perfect coat, looking around at the rot. What would he say?

Matvey’s jaw clenched.

“You speak of Russia like it is a woman,” he thought. *“But here, she is only bone and smoke.”*

They rode on. No flags waved. No cheers rose. Only the soft rhythm of hooves through the mud and the silence of those left behind.

That night, beneath the low canvas of his officer’s tent, Matvey sat hunched over his field desk with a scrap of parchment and a bottle of poor ink. The candle beside him flickered with each gust of wind that slipped through the seams. Outside, the camp muttered in its sleep—horses stamping, men shifting in their dreams, someone coughing the way old barns settle at night.

He dipped the pen and paused. Not from hesitation, but from the weight of beginning. Then, with slow, firm strokes, he wrote.

I do not know what makes me write tonight. Perhaps I am tired in a new way. Not from marching, but from the silence between each footstep. It is as if the land waits for me to speak to it, but gives no tongue with which to answer.

Today we passed another village. The third this week. The peasants looked at us as if we were smoke. Not danger, not saviors. Just something passing between them and the cold. They do not cheer, they do not curse. They endure.

I used to think you were something higher—some light, some law. But now, riding through these places, I begin to feel you closer to the ground. Not in the empire, not in the crown, but in the cracked walls of a chapel, in the breath of a cowled woman holding bread too tightly, in the fence that refuses to fall though all things lean upon it.

If you are truly there, watching, I have only one question. Not why, and not when, but—

Are you waiting?

I will not ask you to speak. Just to remain. Even as the uniforms fade and the maps change hands, remain.

He sat back, the quill still between his fingers, the words settling like ash. He looked down at what he had written. There was no name at the top. He had not written "Russia," nor "Empire," nor "God."

He folded the parchment, not sealing it, and slipped it between the pages of his field journal, where none would look. At the bottom, beneath the final line, he wrote only:

— M. I. K.

The candle flickered again. He watched it, eyes steady, as if daring it to die.

"If you are anything at all," he thought as the flame trembled, "then you already know what I mean."

Then he pinched out the light.

Dawn returned without ceremony. The sky was pale and damp, the color of old bone, and the road ahead stretched south like a wound that refused to close. Men stirred slowly from their tents, boots scraping frozen mud, breath curling in quiet clouds. Fires sputtered back to life. Orders were given in low voices, passed from mouth to mouth like warnings.

Matvey stood at the edge of the camp, hands behind his back, eyes fixed on the distant hills now shrouded in morning mist. The trees there were sparse and twisted, their trunks silver with frost, their silence more eloquent than any command from the general's mouth.

"We march not to conquer," he thought, "but to remind the land that we still belong to it."

He did not say it aloud. There was no need. The thought settled in him like an oath spoken without witnesses.

He turned and watched his men form into ranks, stiff-backed and red-eyed, adjusting packs and checking rifles. Most were peasant boys still bearing the dust of the homes they'd left behind. A few were older, their faces set into masks that no longer changed. Hunger, fatigue, and the cold worked on them all equally, like sculptors with endless patience.

Lieutenant Yegor approached, cloak dragging in the wet earth. "They're ready," he said, voice flat.

Matvey gave a short nod. "Good. Let's not keep the road waiting."

Yegor hesitated, then added, "You don't think we'll see the sea soon, do you?"

Matvey's gaze drifted back to the horizon, where the land folded over itself again and again like cloth too worn to lie smooth.

"No," he said. "We'll see more fields. More mud. More graves."

Yegor didn't respond. He just pulled his collar higher and returned to the men.

Matvey remained, watching the shapes take form: men, rifles, horses, wagons, all preparing to vanish again into the motion that had no end and offered no clarity. And beneath it all, the land — unbothered, vast, listening.

"We do not own you," he thought. "We carry your silence on our backs and call it service."

Then he mounted, gave the signal, and the column began to move.

The Black Shore

Crimea rose like a bruise out of the sea, jagged and dark beneath a sky the color of coal ash. The wind tasted of iron and brine, laced with the sharp tang of smoke carried from burning ships. Matvey stood at the edge of a shattered quay, boots grinding into gravel soaked with salt and blood, watching as the last of the transports unloaded crates, wounded men, and silence.

Sevastopol, or what was left of it, smoldered beneath a curtain of black fog. The city had once been proud, a naval crown on Russia's southern brow. Now its churches were roofless, its streets clawed open by shellfire, its domes collapsed like hollow eggs. Guns roared from the distant hills — not in rhythm, but in fury. French and English artillery had begun their chorus again at dawn. It had not stopped.

Matvey pulled his cloak tighter against the cold that came not from weather, but from proximity to so much ruin. He turned to one of the junior officers beside him, a boy named Ilyin who still smelled of Moscow ink.

"You expected flags?" Matvey asked.

"No, sir," Ilyin said. "But I didn't expect the sky to be on fire."

Matvey said nothing. The boy wasn't wrong.

Beyond the harbor, Russian ships burned where they had been scuttled by their own men — better to sink them than let them fall into enemy hands. The masts jutted from the water like the ribs of drowned giants. Flames licked at them slowly, mournfully. One vessel groaned as it settled deeper, its cannons still aboard, its deck listing like a drunkard kneeling to pray.

The air was thick with salt, fire, and open wounds. The cries of the injured carried from the lazaret tents inland — short, hoarse sounds, not screams but what remained after screaming had done no good.

Matvey inhaled slowly, the sting sharp in his lungs.

“This is not war,” he thought. “This is what follows when war forgets what it was trying to be.”

He looked to the cliffs rising behind the city, where batteries were being dragged into place by oxen and men alike, the path carved into ruts that filled with black water. He would be sent up there soon, he knew. Everyone would. Orders would come, objectives assigned, men spent like cartridges. But for now, there was only arrival. Only the scent of things already lost.

A medic passed leading a mule, its pack soaked red. Matvey stepped aside without a word. The mule did not flinch. It had seen more than most men.

He turned once more to the harbor, to the burning ships and the distant enemy guns, and whispered under his breath, “So this is the end of Russia’s pride. Floating ash and ruined stone.”

Then he walked inland, into the smoke, where command waited — and where the war, at last, would begin in full.

The trench stank of iron and wet wool. Mud crawled into everything — boots, bandages, mouths half-open in sleep. It was not the rich soil of farms but a gray, stinking paste churned by weeks of boots and broken bodies. Matvey stood knee-deep in it, coat clinging to him like a second skin, the hem stiff with dried blood. Not his own — he hadn’t even noticed when it stained him. It belonged to a man from Ryazan who had bled out against his leg two nights ago, his chest ripped open by shrapnel too fast to see and too cruel to forgive.

Cannons thundered above, not at regular intervals, but like something raving — like gods in fever, vomiting fire in paroxysms. Each detonation sent a tremor down the trench wall, and fine dust drifted from the ceiling of makeshift timber like ash shaken loose from heaven. The men ducked instinctively now, even when the shells fell far. The sound alone was enough to thin their breath.

“Keep your heads down!” Matvey shouted, his voice hoarse from cold and smoke. “If you lift it, you’ll lose it!”

One of the conscripts, no older than seventeen, flinched as a cannon cracked close. He pressed his face into the dirt and wept, silently, as if trying to disappear into the earth.

Matvey stepped over him without comment.

He moved along the line, checking rifles, bayonets, the useless sacks of biscuit and powder handed out at ration. The men looked up at him not with respect, but expectation. Officers gave orders. Orders kept men alive. Sometimes.

He stopped beside a boy who held his rifle backwards, trembling.

“Name?” Matvey asked.

“Lev, sir.”

“Where from?”

“Penza.”

Matvey reached out and adjusted the rifle in his hands.

“Hold it like this. If you drop it, I’ll put you on latrine duty until your fingers rot.”

Lev nodded, swallowing.

Matvey moved on.

“These aren’t soldiers,” he thought. “They’re reminders. To the generals. To God. That Russia still has bodies to burn.”

Overhead, another shell screamed. It struck somewhere behind the trench and sent a gout of black soil into the air. A second later came the wet thump of debris landing. Something hit his shoulder — a chunk of wood, or perhaps bone. He didn’t look.

His coat was stiff where the blood had dried. He could feel the weight of it, like rust in fabric.

A lieutenant down the line called out, “They’re shifting guns on the ridge!”

Matvey raised his field glass, focused through smoke and snow.

“No.” He lowered it. “They’re correcting.”

He stepped back down into the trench, where the men crouched in silence. He looked at their faces, pale and blank, smeared with dirt and fear.

“This isn’t where we die,” he said flatly. “This is where we wait.”

He didn’t believe it. But sometimes, belief was a mercy too costly to afford.

“And if the gods are watching,” he thought, as the next cannon shook the sky, “then let them see what they’ve made of us.”

Uniforms no longer resembled uniforms. They were now only gestures — remnants of something once proud, now thinned and broken by cold, hunger, and the indifference of war. Torn epaulets fluttered like flags of surrender in the wind. Buttons were long since torn free, bartered for bread or lost in the mud. Strips of curtain cloth and saddle leather had been tied in place of belts. Some wore coats looted from the dead, too large or too short, the sleeves rolled or stuffed to keep out the frost.

Matvey passed a group huddled against a collapsed trench wall, and saw one man had wrapped rags around his fingers until they were thick as kindling. Frostbite had turned the

skin black at the tips, and the cloth was already dark with pus. Still, he held his rifle as if it might matter when the next wave came.

They did not look at him as he walked past. Officers did not carry morphine. Only orders.

Further back, beneath a shattered overhang of earth and wood, the wounded lay packed together like spoils no one wanted to claim. Sheepskins had been pulled over their bodies, wool-side in, to trap what little heat remained. Some whispered prayers. Others stared at the boards above them, unmoving, their thoughts already elsewhere.

One man clutched a small icon against his chest — St. George, the paint chipped and the gold leaf scraped away. The image was almost gone. The faith remained, or perhaps just the motion of it.

Matvey crouched beside him.

“Where are you from?” he asked, quietly.

“Volgograd,” the man breathed. “Used to be...before it was called that.”

Matvey nodded. “Does it still snow there?”

“Not like this.”

They said nothing more. The man closed his eyes, whether from pain or peace, Matvey couldn’t tell.

He stood and looked around. A dozen others lay wrapped in wool and silence. No surgeon. No priest. Just icons and blood.

“This is not a line of defense,” he thought. “This is a procession to the grave, disguised as duty.”

He glanced down at his own coat. The collar stiff with salt. The buttons mismatched. His gloves fraying. No medals. No stars. Just the outline of what had once been a man in full.

“The Tsar sends us in blue wool and gold thread,” he thought bitterly. “But war strips the thread first. Then the wool. Then the name.”

He turned from the wounded and made his way back to the front, where the cold wind carried the next question of fire across the sky.

It was near dusk when they brought the boy to him — carried in a cloak by two conscripts, both too young to carry death so carefully. The boy’s legs were gone below the knee. The field dressing was loose, soaked through. His face was pale, his lips blue. Breath came in thin, wet gasps, and his eyes darted wildly under half-lowered lids.

“Where do we put him?” one of the conscripts asked, eyes avoiding the boy’s face.

Matvey knelt slowly. “Here,” he said, pointing to a dry patch beside a heap of sandbags. “Leave us.”

The boys hesitated, then backed away, grateful for the excuse.

Matvey pulled his coat tighter and knelt beside the boy, pressing a hand to the lad’s chest. The heartbeat was weak, fluttering like something already half-departed. The boy’s head turned toward him slowly.

“Papa?” he whispered.

Matvey froze. The word struck like a blow — not because it was meant for him, but because he had no right to correct it.

“I’m here,” he said quietly.

The boy’s breath caught. His eyes tried to focus.

“You came back.”

Matvey nodded, swallowing the ash in his throat. “Yes. I never left.”

The boy smiled. His teeth were red.

“It’s cold.”

“I know. You won’t feel it much longer.”

A long pause. The boy blinked, slowly, as if the world were a candle dimming. Then, almost inaudibly, he said, “I thought I was lost.”

Matvey leaned closer, his voice steady now.

“You are home,” he said.

The boy’s breath stopped between one word and the next. His eyes stayed open, but empty now — not vacant, just at peace.

Matvey sat back and looked at him for a long time. No one came. No one called.

He made the sign of the cross over the boy’s chest, not with ceremony, but with quiet familiarity — like a man locking a door he no longer expected to open again.

“I don’t believe,” he thought. “But if he did… that’s enough.”

He stood and covered the boy’s face with the corner of the cloak. The cannons rumbled again somewhere behind the hills, and the wind picked up, carrying the scent of powder and burnt rope.

Matvey did not speak.

There was nothing left to say.

Later that night, long after the wounded had stilled and the fire pits burned down to sullen embers, Matvey sat alone beside the trench wall, elbows on his knees, his rifle across his lap like a sleeping animal. The stars were out, faint behind a gauze of smoke, and the sea could be heard in the far distance — not like water, but like breath drawn slowly through the mouth of something vast and wounded.

He stared into the darkness and thought, not for the first time, about what war was supposed to be. Strategy, movement, order. But none of that lived here. Here there was only mud, the smell of decay, and the slow wearing away of names until even the living forgot who they had been.

A drop of blood had dried on his glove — someone else's. He had stopped noticing whose, or when.

"There is no line between command and compassion," he thought. "Only timing."

He turned the rifle slowly in his hands, inspecting it not as a weapon, but as a weight.

"One must choose when to kill. When to carry. I do both."

He looked up at the black edge of the trench, where the sky sagged heavy over the ridgeline, and thought of the boy who had died that morning, smiling, calling him father.

"And neither feels real."

He had spoken commands that sent men into gunfire. He had pulled wounded men back with his own hands, holding their blood inside them with his sleeves. He had seen mercy. He had given death. But neither settled into his chest like truth. They passed through him like weather — sometimes cold, sometimes burning — but never with meaning that lingered.

The war had turned every gesture into habit. His voice no longer rose in anger, his hands no longer trembled. Even his grief had hardened into something still. Like stone under frost.

He heard boots approaching in the dark. A junior officer, perhaps. Another message. Another number.

Matvey didn't move. He only closed his eyes for a breath and thought,

"If I have a soul, it must be buried somewhere under this mud, waiting for spring that will never come."

Then he rose, took up his rifle, and walked into the dark toward whatever order awaited next.

Twilight had settled low across the trench line, the horizon flickering dim behind the curling smoke of distant cannon fire. The air hung with the smell of burned powder and salt, the ground still wet from the night's cold dew. Matvey crouched at the edge of a collapsed gun embankment, his breath quiet, gaze trained past the wire and charred shrubs.

Something moved.

Far off — barely a stir at first — shadows against the slope of a low hill, sliding between gorse and bush. The uniforms were wrong. Sleeker, cleaner. Blue with flashes of red trim. They were not his.

He narrowed his eyes. A French advance party — no more than twenty — slipping along the ridge under the fading light, trying to circle behind the forward Russian trench. They moved carefully, rifles lowered, whispering, scanning.

He raised a hand and signaled without sound.

Within moments, nine of his men crept to him from the shelter of the trench wall — dirty, silent, already gripping their rifles close. Matvey pointed toward the brush line and they understood.

They moved as shadows — low, swift, through ruined scrub and blasted tree stumps. The wind shifted in their favor, and the French did not hear them until it was too late.

The first shots rang out sharp and sudden — crack, crack, crack — and three French soldiers fell before they even turned. One stumbled back into a thicket, blood flowering at his throat. Then the reloading began — slow, fumbling, desperate — powder, ramrod, shot. A race of hands.

Matvey didn't wait.

He dropped his spent musket and drew his bayonet, eyes fixed on the nearest Frenchman crouching behind a rock. The others followed — blades drawn, boots pounding the wet earth.

They slammed into the French line like a wave — brutal, close, final. Metal tore flesh. Boots struck bone. Matvey lunged toward the man behind the rock, caught his arm mid-load, and drove the bayonet through his eye, deep into the skull. The man spasmed once, then fell, the blade buried to the hilt.

Around him, chaos burned fast and vicious — one of his soldiers slit a throat with the edge of a saber, another tackled a Frenchman into the mud and beat him with the butt of a broken rifle. Screams tangled with shouts, with the wet gurgle of blood. The bushes shook with the struggle.

When it ended, the ground was scattered with bodies — limbs bent, uniforms torn, blood soaking into the soil. Of the twenty French, only one crawled away wounded before a Russian blade silenced him. Matvey's group had lost two — both young — one with a musket ball in the gut, the other with his neck slashed open.

Matvey stood still for a long moment, blood on his hands, bayonet red to the guard. The sun had dipped beyond the ridge now, and the sea whispered beyond the hills.

One of his men stepped beside him. "We caught them in silence," the man said.

Matvey looked down at the dead, the wet earth sucking at their boots, the steam rising from warm corpses cooling too quickly in the evening air.

“No,” Matvey replied, voice low. “The silence caught them.”

The Winter Field

Snow had fallen without wind, a soft white silence that buried everything — boots, trenches, rifles, and men. By morning, the battlefield was transformed into something still, almost holy. There were no screams now, no cannon blasts, no shouts of orders across the line. Only the slow breath of a world remembering how to rest.

Matvey walked alone through the field, his coat drawn tight against the cold, his boots crunching through snow that had frozen over the night. The sky above was a pale lid of cloud, and the horizon had vanished into whiteness. His breath trailed behind him like smoke from a dying fire.

Here and there, the snow rose in unnatural humps. He knew what they were.

He crouched beside the first, brushing snow from the face beneath — a young soldier, no more than twenty. His eyes were closed, lips slightly parted, a dusting of frost along his lashes. He had died upright, knees folded beneath him like prayer. A rifle still rested in the crook of his arm, frozen there by morning.

Matvey placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder. Not to claim, not to comfort — only to acknowledge.

“I see you,” he whispered.

He moved on.

Some of the dead were face-down, others tangled together as if they had sought warmth in their final moments. A few still clutched icons or letters. The snow covered them all equally — officers, peasants, boys from St. Petersburg schools and men who had never seen stone buildings before this war.

He paused beside another corpse, half-buried beneath drift and rubble. Part of a face showed — gray skin, a torn cheek, one eye glazed open, looking at nothing. Matvey did not flinch. He reached down and closed the eye with his thumb.

“This is all I can give you,” he thought. “Not burial. Not glory. Just presence.”

His breath came slow, not from grief, but from the cold weight of witnessing.

No priests had walked this field. No flags marked the ground. The bodies lay as they fell, anonymous beneath the frost, and yet — each of them had a name once. A voice. A place. Someone waiting who would never be told properly.

Matvey straightened and looked across the plain.

Snow drifted softly from the sky, as if the world had decided to forget.

He kept walking, stopping at each mound to place a hand upon it. Sometimes the shoulder, sometimes the back, sometimes only the edge of a boot.

The ritual was not for the dead. It was to remind himself he was not.

*"*If I do not touch them," he thought, "I will become one of them in spirit, if not in flesh."

And so he walked, and touched, and whispered nothing, letting the silence carry what words could not.

By late afternoon, the smoke had begun to rise in small columns from the shallows of the trench line. Fires crackled low where the men had gathered in knots, shielding their hands with rags and broken helmets. Fuel was scarce — damp wood, splintered wagon frames, whatever could burn without poisoning the air. Some fires hissed blue with paint and varnish.

Matvey passed one group of conscripts kneeling around a flame that sputtered against the wind. At its center, feeding the fire like a priest making offerings, one soldier placed a small wooden icon into the coals — the Virgin, the paint flaking as it caught. Another followed, casting in a saint's face carved into a shattered door. No one spoke. The eyes of the icons blistered, then blackened, then vanished into smoke.

"They burn their own prayers now," Matvey murmured.

A voice answered from behind.

"They burn what keeps them alive," said Lieutenant Yegor. He stood nearby, arms folded, his coat too fine for the cold but spotless. "They don't do it to spite. They do it to cook soup."

Matvey nodded, watching as another piece of sacred wood fed the fire.

Further uphill, behind the ridgeline where the officers camped, the air smelled different — not of ash, but of meat and wine. A requisition cart from a Georgian estate had arrived that morning. The crates were filled with glass wine bottles wrapped in straw, their necks stamped with foreign seals. The officers drank slowly, gloves removed, seated on salvaged chairs around a butchered piano that served as a table. Some laughed. One quoted poetry.

Matvey did not sit with them. He stood at a distance, watching the scene as if through glass.

A junior officer raised a glass toward him. "Captain K—! Join us! The Tsar's wine runs freely tonight."

Matvey raised a hand in acknowledgment, but did not move.

Behind him, the fires of the enlisted men cracked and hissed around scraps of saintly wood.

“In death, we all look the same,” he thought, “but in life, we are measured by what we burn and what we drink.”

He turned back toward the trench, where the snow fell soft and steady, trying again to make everything appear equal.

It never could.

The snow thickened through the evening, blanketing everything in a silence that felt deliberate — as if the land itself had chosen to muffle the sound of injustice. Matvey stood beneath the skeletal frame of a wrecked supply cart, its wheels jutting from the drift like bones. Smoke drifted low from the enlisted fires, curling around boot heels and grave pits alike. He could smell fat cooking. Somewhere near, someone coughed blood into a rag and did not hide it.

He pulled his coat tighter and walked away from the officer’s camp, away from the smell of roast meat and laughter, toward the trenches where men huddled together in wet wool and smoke-stung silence. One had stuffed straw into his boots to keep the frost from taking his toes. Another sat with his back to a collapsed parapet, eyes open but no longer seeing, his face half-covered in ice.

Matvey stopped a moment and looked down at the corpse. No one had covered it.

“He died in silence,” he thought. “And we will leave him in silence. That’s the only equality left here.”

A gust of wind lifted the flap of a nearby tent and he saw, inside, two soldiers sharing a crust of bread. One tore it slowly, giving the larger half to the other without words.

“If Russia is my father,” Matvey thought bitterly, “then he does not feed his children equally.”

The words came unbidden, sharp, and true. He didn’t flinch from them. He had spent his life speaking the name of the Fatherland with reverence, but now it caught in his mouth like a splinter.

“He feeds some with wine,” he thought. “Feeds others to the fire.”

He crouched and touched the dead man’s arm, stiff and cold, and felt nothing but shame in his own warmth.

“Forgive me,” he whispered, though he didn’t know to whom the words were meant.

To the corpse? To the snow? To the name of the Tsar on the brass buttons of his coat?

He stood again, and the thought returned, unshaken:

“The Father loves some sons more than others. I know that now. And I will not forget it.”

He turned and walked back through the field, boots heavy with snow and something deeper.

The ruins lay scattered across the hills like memories no one had the strength to gather. Farmhouses once humble and whole were now nothing more than frames of blackened timber, roofs collapsed inward like chests caved by grief. Charred beams jutted at crooked angles, scorched down to bone. Snow settled gently over them all, as if trying to forgive what had already been condemned.

Matvey stepped carefully through what had been a courtyard, his boots sinking into ash softened by meltwater. A wooden door leaned against the ground, its iron hinges twisted by fire. The smell of smoke still lingered beneath the clean chill of snow, clinging to what remained like the scent of an old wound.

Inside what had once been a home, he found the corner of a wall still standing, and there — nailed crookedly above a blackened hearth — hung a half-burned icon. The Virgin and Child, their faces warped by heat. The child's eyes had melted into the wood. The Virgin's hand was missing. The gold leaf had blistered and peeled away.

Matvey stopped before it and slowly knelt, not in prayer, but in mourning.

He didn't close his eyes. He didn't cross himself.

He simply looked.

A few broken plates lay nearby. A bent spoon. A child's boot, untouched by flame, soaked with snow.

He reached out and touched the bottom of the icon, fingers brushing the charred edge.

"Who lived here?" he wondered. "Whose hands cooked by this fire? Whose voice sang under this roof?"

There were no names, no records, no stories left. Only remains. He felt no command to weep, but something deeper — the weight of witnessing.

"We were meant to protect them," he thought, "or so we were told. But here, nothing was spared. Not even the sacred."

The Virgin stared past him, her face cracked and scorched, and yet still upright. Still watching.

"You endured," he thought. "More than we did."

He stood slowly, brushing ash from his knees.

Around him, the wind sighed through the ruin.

He took nothing. Said nothing.

He left the icon where it was — as witness, as wound, as memory nailed into the bones of the land.

That night, beneath canvas darkened by smoke and weather, Matvey wrote again by the dim orange flicker of tallow light. The ink froze in the nib, then ran too freely, bleeding into the coarse paper, as if the words themselves had grown tired of waiting.

He did not write a date. He did not write a name. Only the words that came, slowly, as if pulled from someplace deeper than thought.

I walked today through what used to be a house. There were toys burned to ash. A spoon warped by flame. A piece of bread left half-eaten on the floor. The walls had fallen in, but the icon above the hearth still hung, scorched but upright. She was watching. I don't know what for.

There are no more illusions in me, if there ever were. I have seen how the prayers we carry are turned into kindling. I have watched the young freeze with rifles in their arms, still waiting for an order that never came. I have watched officers toast one another while corpses stiffen a few steps away.

And still I speak to you.

He paused. The ink blotched where his pen hesitated. He turned the page slightly, wrote again, slower now.

I am your son. I will not pretend otherwise. I was raised in your silence, your cold, your names spoken like commandments. I have served as I was taught — without question, without softness.

But I do not understand you.

You speak to no one. You take from all. You feed the noble with pride and the peasant with graves. You send us to die not for victory, but for memory.

I do not know if you are cruel. I do not know if you are deaf. But I know you do not answer.

The ink began to run from a drop of melted snow that had fallen from the tent seam above. The words blurred, softened into shadow. He let them. There was nothing left to make clearer.

He signed the page with three initials, the same as before.

— M. I. K.

Then folded it and tucked it beside the first letter, in the pouch he kept against his chest.

"If you ever read these," he thought, "I hope you remember the face of even one man you took."

He lay down then, not to sleep, but to listen — to the wind, to the cracking frost, to the breathing of the wounded nearby.

And to the silence that answered nothing.

The Hollow Glory

Trumpets cried out at dawn like voices that had never heard war. The notes were too clean for this place, too proud. They cut through the smoke like glass, announcing what the officers called a victory — a successful holding of the ridge, a repelled advance, a few hundred meters of scorched hillside that no sane man would choose to sleep on twice.

The men stood in ranks again, stiff with cold and disbelief, while above them on the rise, the staff officers read from parchment. Words like valor, devotion, and honor fell like frost over bodies still stiffening in shallow graves just beyond the line.

Matvey stood in his greatcoat, hands clasped behind his back, boots caked with last night's snow and the last week's blood. His uniform had been brushed hastily. A fresh strap crossed his chest. His hair had been combed by another officer's hand, as if appearance could summon pride where none remained.

General Khitrovo's voice boomed over the wind.

"Let all men know this ridge stands because of Russian courage! And let those who doubted remember — our spirit is greater than the cannon!"

There was no cheering. The men were too tired for lies. A few saluted from reflex.

Matvey's name was read.

"Captain Matvey Ivanovich K—," the general intoned, pausing for effect. "For gallantry under fire and for rallying the left flank against superior force."

A medal was pinned to his chest — a dull bronze cross with a ribbon stained from the general's glove. Matvey saluted without expression, then stepped back into line.

Later, alone behind the medical tent, he unpinned it.

He turned it over in his hand, tracing the stamp of the Tsar's profile with a thumb thickened by frost and friction.

"Gallantry," he thought. "I stepped over the wounded and shouted louder than the others. That was enough."

He wrapped the medal in a scrap of linen torn from a ruined chapel flag, then bent down and tucked it into the hollow of his boot, between the leather and the wool.

Not out of shame.

Out of refusal.

It was not a thing to wear on the chest. Not here. Not now.

He stood slowly, glancing toward the horizon where the next fire was already rising, some village smoldering beyond the hills.

“Let the ground carry it,” he thought. “Not my heart.”

And then he walked away from the speeches and the smoke, back toward the trench where silence waited faithfully for its sons to return.

The village had already burned before they arrived — or so the officers claimed. A few walls still stood, scorched but upright, and smoke poured from the shell of a chapel whose bells had fallen silent in the snow. Carts lay overturned in the mud, livestock scattered or dead. Matvey dismounted slowly, eyes scanning the road as shouts echoed from behind houses that no longer had doors.

He walked past Lieutenant Borodin, who laughed as he carried a sack of preserved fruit under one arm and a French porcelain teapot under the other. His boots were polished.

“They left it behind,” Borodin said with a smirk, not meeting Matvey’s eyes.

Matvey said nothing.

Further down the path, two officers from another company were dragging a barrel of wine from a collapsed storehouse, one whistling, the other cursing the weight. Behind them, a soldier kicked through a pile of prayer books, scattering the pages like feathers.

Matvey stopped at the edge of the village square. A girl screamed.

The sound cleaved the air — not long, not theatrical, but sharp, like the crack of green wood. She couldn’t have been older than ten. Her hands were clenched around the torn hem of her mother’s skirt. The woman lay curled in the snow, one arm over her face, her scarf pulled away, blood in her hair.

An officer stood above them, belt still unbuckled, eyes red with wine. He raised his hand again. The girl screamed once more.

Matvey stepped forward, his boots crunching hard. But another officer caught his arm.

“Don’t,” the man whispered. “You’ll be stripped of command.”

Matvey looked at him, eyes unmoving.

“She’s a civilian.”

“She’s no one,” the man said.

Matvey stood still. The scream faded. The officer turned and walked away, laughing with another who carried a tapestry over his shoulder like a cloak.

The girl no longer made a sound. She just held her mother and shook.

Matvey didn't move.

"If I speak, I lose everything. If I stay, I lose more."

He reached into his coat, pulled free a strip of hard bread, and walked slowly toward the girl. He didn't speak. He knelt, left the bread on the stone beside her, and turned without a word.

She didn't look at him.

No one did.

As he walked back through the snow, the wind picked up, scattering ash from the chapel ruins.

"We dress ourselves in orders and call it honor," he thought. "But the dead see who we are."

And the silence followed him, unbroken, unchanged.

The uniforms began to shine again.

New crates had arrived from St. Petersburg under military guard — lacquered boxes bearing the seal of the Ministry, wrapped in linen and marked with gilded ink. Officers gathered like moths around the wagon wheels as if salvation had come in wood and wax.

Within days, the changes were visible. Tunics no longer sagged with damp and blood but gleamed with fresh dye and stiffened collars. Epaulets reappeared in gold and silver, buttons gleamed like medals, and every officer who had once marched through ash now stood as if preparing for a parade. The brass polished. The boots blackened. The image restored.

Matvey stood outside the officer's tent, watching as they opened the next crate. Out came bundles of silk — flags, pristine and sweet-smelling, their folds untouched by mud. The regimental banner, once torn in three and wrapped around a dead soldier's legs for burial cloth, was now replaced with a new one that snapped sharply in the wind.

The officers clapped each other on the back. French brandy passed from hand to hand in glass flasks with silver caps. One lieutenant lit a cigar from the capital, the kind Matvey remembered seeing in his father's parlor, untouched, preserved for guests who never came.

A junior officer approached Matvey, holding a box of pressed tobacco wrapped in fine paper.

"From the Tsar's own storehouses," he grinned. "You should take some."

Matvey looked at it, then up at him.

"Did they send boots for the wounded?" he asked.

The officer's smile dimmed. "No mention."

"Blankets?"

"Only for officers."

Matvey turned his gaze back toward the crates.

“The empire resupplies symbols,” he thought,

He looked down at his own coat, mended three times at the seams. His boots still bore dried blood — not his own. The men in the trenches would see none of this shipment. They would receive no new wool, no dry gloves, no letters of thanks.

Only more commands, written on clean paper by clean hands.

He turned and walked toward the edge of camp, where the snow fell quietly and the fire pits had already gone out.

“You can polish the brass,” he thought, “but the smoke still clings.”

And behind him, the new flags fluttered like lies made beautiful.

The wind had softened by evening, and Matvey stood at the crest of a low hill just beyond the outer lines, where the land dipped into old farmland now flattened by artillery. He had come alone, under pretense of inspection, but there was nothing left to inspect. Only snow and churned soil and silence.

He turned his back to the camp and looked out across the open field, remembering.

His grandfather had spoken often of war — not with cruelty, but with ceremony. Stories told by candlelight, voice thick with pride, mustache trembling as he recounted cavalry charges, duels in Polish fields, frozen rivers crossed by fire and faith. There had been honor in those tales, and even in death, a kind of music. Soldiers with plumed hats. War was not just battle — it was theatre. Righteousness measured in steel and posture.

Matvey had believed him.

He had sat at his grandfather’s feet, eyes wide, fingers curled around the carved armrest of the great chair in the drawing room, imagining the snow as something noble, imagining wounds as medals yet to be named.

Now he stood beneath a sky heavy with soot, and there were no plumes, no bows, no lines of honor.

There were only trenches that filled with water and rats. Orders that served no purpose but momentum. Men who cried in their sleep and bled in silence. He had watched a boy drown in mud, not in battle, but in retreat. No song. No glory.

“I believed him,” Matvey thought. “I was wrong.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, the wind brushing his face with cold fingers.

“Or maybe he was wrong,” he added. “And needed to believe himself.”

And that, too, was a kind of war.

He opened his eyes again and looked toward the horizon, where smoke curled slowly from the remains of another village.

No banners flew.

Just the slow forgetting of all the tales ever told.

The stars were sharp that night, burning like distant eyes above the shattered camp. Matvey sat alone beside the collapsed ruins of a field battery, its wheels split, the barrel tilted skyward as if begging the heavens to remember its purpose. The fire beside him had died down to embers. He didn't stir it.

The silence was whole — not empty, but complete. Even the wind held its breath.

He stared at the dark line of the southern hills, where enemy guns sometimes flashed in the distance, too far now to fear, too near to forget. His fingers were stiff in his gloves. His boots ached from the cold seeping up through the earth. But he felt none of it clearly. Only the weight of thought.

"Russia," he began within himself, the name rising like a thorn in the chest, "are you testing me?"

He let the question hang in the silence, unanswered, as always.

"Or am I merely your tool?" he continued. "Something hammered into shape before I was old enough to choose. A blade you sharpened on history and then left to rust in the field, pointed toward whatever direction served you next."

He looked down at his hands, rough and calloused, knuckles raw where the leather had worn thin.

"You speak no words to me, but you move me. You command without breath, without face. You are not king not god. And still I serve."

He clenched one fist slowly, then opened it.

"If I am your instrument, then I am dulling. You use me, but you do not keep me clean. You wear down my edge and expect music where only grinding remains."

A shout echoed in the distance, followed by laughter — officers drunk again, celebrating their small moment of control. Somewhere a man sobbed quietly behind a makeshift wall of crates.

Matvey closed his eyes.

"I want to believe there is meaning in this. That you are shaping something greater through us. But each day, you feel more like the echo of a promise that was never truly made."

He opened his eyes again and looked to the sky, cold and perfect and beyond knowing.

“If I am yours,” he thought, “then speak to me. Not in symbols. Not in orders. Speak plainly, before I break into pieces too small to carry.”

But the silence was the same.

And he did not move.

The Quiet March

The retreat came without trumpet or warning, spoken not in declarations but in murmurs passed down from command tents at dusk. Orders shifted like sand—first east, then south, then east again. Matvey stood among his men at dawn, reading the newest dispatch by the light of a dying torch, the ink smudged with frost. The road was not named. Only a direction. Only a distance.

They marched before the sun broke the horizon, their boots sinking into snow that now reached the tops of their calves, crusted with ice and ash. Packs heavier than their bodies. Rifles dull with soot. There was no clear enemy behind them—only the sound of far cannonfire, and the sense that something had already been lost, something no order could reclaim.

Matvey walked at the head of the line, silent, his breath rising in plumes that blurred his vision. The road had become a ghost, swallowed in white. The map in his coat pocket was wrong again—rivers misplaced, towns marked where none remained. Even the officers no longer argued about routes. They simply pointed and moved.

At intervals, he lifted his eyes to the sky. There, among the haze, the stars still clung — the only things that had not betrayed them. He found Polaris and held to it like a nail driven through uncertainty.

“Maps lie,” he thought. “Stars do not.”

Behind him, boots crunched, men coughed. A horse snorted against the cold, snot hanging from the nose. No one asked where they were going. They had learned not to.

The snow deepened. The silence grew.

And Russia—unseen, unheard—walked with them, heavy and invisible, like memory that would not leave.

The snow did not let up. It fell in slow, constant flurries, covering tracks almost as soon as they were made. Trees passed like silent watchers, their black limbs bare, bent by weight. Time no longer moved in hours, only in the distance between exhaustion and collapse.

Somewhere near the rear of the column, a soldier began to laugh — a high, broken sound that twisted into a scream. He threw down his rifle, clutched his sides, and spun once in the snow before dropping to his knees. His eyes were wide, fixed on something only he could see.

“The ground is hollow!” he shouted, pounding it with his fists. “There’s nothing underneath us!”

Others slowed. One man muttered a prayer. Another called for an officer.

Matvey did not stop. He had seen it before — the mind slipping loose, like a boot sucked down into the mud, never recovered. Two men slapped him and pulled the screaming soldier back into line. The scream faded to sobs, then nothing.

A few paces later, a boy began to sing — low, halting, almost like humming. The words were not for the march, nor for any marching song. They were simple, soft:

“Mama, wait… mama, wait for me…”

He repeated the line over and over, his voice cracking on the third time. His eyes stayed forward. Snow collected in his eyelashes. No one told him to stop.

Matvey adjusted the straps on his back. He now carried the rations for three men — two dead, one too sick to lift his own pack. His shoulders ached. The bread was frozen hard, the salted meat already stiff with cold. He bore the weight in silence, letting the pain sink into his spine like a splinter he refused to remove.

He looked at neither the madman nor the boy.

There were no words for this stretch of the journey. No instructions. No comfort.

Only the quiet crunch of boots behind him, the breath of men on the edge of breaking, and the long white road that offered no end.

He shifted his load slightly, steadied his footing, and walked on.

They passed through another estate — abandoned, but not ruined. The snow had drifted through shattered windows and open doors, softening the grandeur into something pale and quiet. The kind of silence that once only servants heard when nobles slept.

Matvey stepped through a parlor where the air still smelled faintly of perfume and mold. A chandelier of crystal hung from the ceiling like a ghost — its prisms cracked, dulled by frost, no longer catching light but holding it prisoner in their fractures. Beneath it, the parquet floor creaked under boots and the weight of memory.

In the next room, velvet chairs sagged under the weight of mice nesting in their hollows, their stuffing pulled loose like entrails. The fabric, once burgundy, had faded into the color of dried blood. A samovar lay on its side beside a blackened fireplace, dented but unbroken.

Matvey paused in a hall where the wallpaper still clung in long curling strips. On the walls, portraits of forgotten men and women stared down from oval frames, powdered faces and painted medals—long dead, and now surrounded by cold.

In the drawing room, someone had already lit a fire. Broken chairs and stripped bannisters fed the flames. One of the men held up a length of embroidered cloth — gold thread and delicate stitching — before tearing it in half and adding it to the pile.

“Burns better than hay,” he muttered.

Matvey said nothing. He stepped through the rooms slowly, his eyes moving not with curiosity, but with the recognition of contrast.

Here, beauty had turned to warmth for freezing men.

In one room, an untouched piano. He touched a key. The sound was brittle, thin — a note without a home.

“This was once the edge of Russia’s grace,” he thought. “And now it is kindling.”

Outside, the march waited. Inside, the last traces of dignity smoldered quietly, thread by thread, into ash.

The fire crackled in the remains of what had once been a schoolhouse or perhaps a provincial estate library—its shelves long looted, its roof open to the falling snow. Matvey stood beneath the broken arch of a doorway, watching figures huddle around a fire built in what had once been a reading room. The walls were lined with empty shelves. Charred spines littered the floor.

Peasants moved with slow, deliberate hands, unwrapping books from snow-soaked sacks, shaking the frost from their pages, then feeding them to the flames one by one.

He recognized the shape of them — gilt-edged volumes, bindings of calfskin and buckram, titles stamped in fading Cyrillic. He could smell the ink in the smoke.

One old man sat closest to the fire, hands trembling as he held a thick tome with torn leather corners. His beard was crusted with ice, and his boots were wrapped in twine. He stared at the book for a long time, not reading, only holding it like a relic.

Then, slowly, he leaned forward and kissed the cover.

He said something under his breath, words lost in the crackle of heat, and placed the book gently atop the burning pile.

The flames took it quickly. The gold leaf bubbled. The pages curled like dry leaves.

Matvey did not step closer.

“Knowledge becomes heat,” he thought. “And memory becomes ash.”

He looked into the faces around the fire — men with cracked hands and hollow cheeks, their eyes reflecting the glow with the calm of those who had stopped asking for fairness.

They were not vandals. They were cold.

He imagined the shelves once full. Children learning letters. Someone writing a poem under that broken window. And now the warmth of the past rose in smoke above the flames.

He turned away quietly.

“We inherit beauty,” he thought, “but hunger decides what survives.”

The wind howled that night, louder than it had in days, rattling the boards nailed over windows, tugging at every loose flap of canvas and cloth. Matvey sat beneath the broken rafters of what had once been a schoolmaster’s office, a desk overturned for firewood, chalk dust frozen into the corners of the room. His breath rose in white spirals as he unfolded his notebook, the same worn pages he had written into since the first snow of the campaign.

The ink was thick from cold. He had to warm the nib with his fingers before it would flow.

He did not begin with a greeting. He never did now.

The children eat pages, Father.

I saw them tonight — not as metaphor, but as truth. A girl no older than six held a book like a biscuit. She chewed slowly, eyes wide, not from madness, but hunger. The older boys tore the covers into strips and fed them to the fire. One rubbed the pages between his hands to keep warm. None of them knew what they burned. None of them could read the names on the spines.

These were not criminals. These were your children.

Do you see them?

Matvey paused, listening to the wind batter the shutters. Somewhere below, a soldier coughed until he spat blood. Somewhere else, boots stomped snow from the threshold. Life, still happening.

He wrote on.

You once spoke to us through words — through laws, through psalms, through orders written in fine script. Now the words feed flames and bellies, and I must ask: do you still know our names?

You say we are yours. That we serve you. That we bleed in your image.

But Father, do you see what we have become?

Do you care what carries your flag now?

The ink blurred where his hand trembled slightly. He let it.

He signed, as always, only with his initials.

— M. I. K.

He folded the letter and placed it with the others, pressed flat against his chest. There were many now. More words in that bundle than rations left in his bag.

He sat for a while longer in the cold, the pen resting in his hand like a bayonet that had long lost its edge.

And he thought — not for the first time — that perhaps the silence he wrote into was not absence, but the only answer Russia knew how to give.

The Wound

The battle came sudden and stupid, like a shout in the dark that turns to blood before it makes sense. It was midday, sky iron-gray, the snow slushed into muck beneath weeks of feet. No one had expected a charge—not in that sector, not after days of stillness. The enemy rose from the tree line without warning, rifles blazing, sabers catching pale light like teeth.

Matvey had just turned to speak when the air around him cracked open. A sound like the splitting of wood and the tearing of the world. Then heat. Then nothing.

He staggered back, mouth open but without breath. He did not fall immediately. The sky wheeled above him in slow, ponderous arcs, and the snow below seemed to tilt like a boat caught in storm surge.

Pain came late.

He reached down and touched his side. His glove came back dark, wet, heavy with something deeper than rain. A piece of shrapnel, curved like a sickle, had torn through his coat just above the hip. It burned—not with fire, but with a cold so sharp it numbed him.

He dropped to one knee. A voice called his name, distant. Footsteps thudded past. Gunfire still roared at the edge of the field.

But for Matvey, the sound had grown distant, like something remembered in a fever.

He blinked. The sky grew brighter. Or was it his vision fading?

Then, gently, as if memory itself reached down, he saw her.

His mother’s hands, soft and pale, dusted with flour, holding out bread still warm from the oven.

She said nothing. Only offered the bread, broken in half, steam rising like forgiveness.

He reached for it.

Then the snow rose to meet him, and the sound of the world narrowed to breath. His own. Slow, then slower. The sky turned white. Then darker.

And her hands remained, suspended in that final kindness, just out of reach.

Light came back in pulses. At first he thought it was dawn through curtains, as in childhood — the soft gray of Yaroslavl mornings, the smell of porridge and pine wax. But then the stench struck him. Not of home, but of blood, boiled bandages, wet wool, and something sharp beneath it all — pus, and lavender oil, futile in its attempt to mask rot.

He opened his eyes to beams of ceiling slats and whitewashed stone. Groaning rose all around him, like a choir of suffering barely held together. Beds — if they could be called that — lined the walls. Some were cots. Some, wooden boards laid across crates. Others, nothing but folded coats.

A man near him was sobbing softly, fingers twitching in the air as if grasping at ghosts. Another muttered a litany of names — comrades, brothers, saints, he no longer seemed to distinguish. Matvey turned his head. The motion sent a jolt of fire through his side, and he gasped, gripping the edge of the mattress.

He looked down.

His coat was gone. His tunic, cut away. His torso wrapped in rough linens soaked with a brownish stain, dried at the edges. Beside him on a small table, a twisted piece of shrapnel sat in a tin tray. His blood still dark on it. A surgeon's relic.

Footsteps approached — soft, deliberate, almost theatrical.

A priest, black robes rustling faintly as he walked the rows. A censer swung in his hand, tendrils of incense trailing in the cold air, mixing uneasily with the smell of death. He murmured blessings at each bed, making the sign of the cross without looking into the faces. His lips moved by habit, his eyes fixed on something above the wounded, as though the task were performed for someone else entirely.

When he reached Matvey's side, he paused. He dipped his fingers in oil and raised them slowly.

"In the name of the Father…"

But Matvey turned his face away.

Not abruptly, not with anger. Just enough to make it known.

The priest hesitated. His hand lowered. He moved on.

Matvey closed his eyes again. The scent of lavender clung like guilt.

"Blessings won't sew me shut," he thought. "And I've already given too much to be saved."

Around him, the moaning swelled again, as though the hospital itself were breathing. A wounded rhythm. Human and endless.

The next time they came for him, it was with leather straps and a crooked cart with one wheel that groaned like a dying mule. Two orderlies, eyes dulled by repetition, lifted him without asking. He gritted his teeth as the motion tore through his side like teeth made of fire.

They brought him into a chamber that had once been a chapel — the icons torn from the walls, the altar now a table for instruments. Light from the high windows streamed down in pale lines across steel scissors, bone saws, thread, and stained cloth. The room did not smell of sanctity, only iron and burned linen.

There was no morphine.

“We are saving it for amputations,” the surgeon said flatly as he wiped a blade. “You’ll manage.”

Matvey said nothing. His jaw was locked. He stared up at the cracked ceiling, searching for anything but the next moment.

They cut away the bandages. The air touched his wound and he felt the world narrow to a point, white-hot and endless. His fists clenched. His eyes watered but did not close.

The doctor worked quickly. The stitching was rough, the thread dark, hands practiced, impersonal.

“You are lucky,” the doctor muttered as he tied the final knot. “No bone shattered. If infection does not find you, you’ll walk. Even ride again, with time.”

Matvey turned his head slowly, not toward the doctor, but toward the shadowy corner where a candle flickered before a soot-stained wall.

“I do not feel lucky,” he thought.

He wanted to say it aloud, but the words stayed in his throat. Not out of fear. Out of something older — a fatigue too deep for language.

The doctor nodded to the orderlies. They lifted him again, laid him back onto the cot, now clean with fresh wrappings.

“Rest, Captain,” the surgeon said, voice distant. “You live.”

But Matvey did not feel like he had survived.

He felt like something had been stolen and replaced with silence.

He lay back, staring at the beams of the ceiling, and listened to the groans of the others echoing like prayers never meant to be answered.

The hours stretched, not in sequence, but in waves — shallow at first, then drowning. Light faded. Returned. Faded again. The room changed only in temperature. His fever climbed, dropped, climbed again. At times he saw clearly the rafters above, the shadows moving slowly with the sun. Other times, he saw faces that weren't there: his mother, her brow lined with sorrow; his grandfather, seated in his uniform, silent and stern; and once, even the boy who had died in the trench, smiling with blood in his teeth.

Matvey lay still, bound in pain like a body held beneath ice.

Thought dissolved. There was only the breath — sometimes caught, sometimes gasping. The wound in his side throbbed like a second heartbeat, pulsing without mercy.

And in the heart of it, beneath the fever, the silence, the stink of flesh mending itself too slowly — he heard it.

A voice.

Not spoken, not heard, but known.

"Father."

He didn't say it aloud. The word lived only behind his teeth, heavy as a coin he refused to spend.

"Pain strips thought from the body like bark from a tree," he thought. "But beneath it…"

He closed his eyes.

"…beneath it, I hear your voice."

Not soothing. Not kind. But constant.

Quiet. Cold. Calling.

Not in words. Not in orders. Only presence — vast, unyielding, like the steppe itself.

"You are not done with me," he thought. "And I do not know why."

He gripped the blanket with weak fingers, not for warmth, but to remind himself the world still held shape.

The voice did not answer. It never had.

But it remained. Like iron in the blood. Like frost in the marrow. Like Russia — unseen, unheard, and everywhere.

The night was still, pierced only by the ticking of a cracked clock in the far corner of the ward and the occasional cough from a man half-asleep in pain. A candle guttered on the table near Matvey's cot, the flame bending in a draft that came through the broken pane above.

He lay propped against a stack of thin pillows, breath shallow, side wrapped tight in clean linen, though the pain beneath still pulsed with its own rhythm. His right hand trembled as he wrote — not from fear, nor fever, but from something quieter: endurance wearing thin.

The paper was creased, smudged with ash from earlier fires. Still, he wrote slowly, shaping each letter with care, as though trying to tether his breath to ink.

You are still mine. Even now. Even when I am no longer whole, no longer proud, no longer able to lift my sword or shout over the roar — I do not curse you.

I have cursed men. I have cursed fate. I have cursed silence and hunger and snow that buries the dead before their names are spoken. But not you. Not once.

He paused, dipping the nib again. The ink caught and ran slightly, but he continued.

I do not say this from devotion. I say it because it is true. You are the cold breath in my lungs and the ache in my bones. You are the weight I carry, even when I fall. You are the song I cannot sing but still remember.

I am broken.

But I am still yours.

He signed as he always did — simply, without flourish.

— M. I. K.

He folded the page with care and slipped it inside the packet pressed close to his heart. The pages rustled softly like leaves in late autumn — thin, fragile, but not fallen.

He lay back and let the dark take him again, the candle burning low, the ink still drying on words meant for a land that never wrote back.

Peace Without Shape

The war ended without thunder. No final charge, no triumphant bell, no clear horizon crossed beneath waving banners. It ended in ink, signatures, and silences. Men looked up from the mud one morning and found the guns no longer speaking. Orders ceased. Maps folded. The trenches filled with meltwater, and the bodies were left to the soil as if they had never borne names.

Matvey did not celebrate. There was no moment of release, only a quiet unbinding — of purpose, of command, of the thread that had pulled him through each bitter mile.

He returned north slowly, in a convoy of broken wheels and hollow-eyed survivors. The journey passed through ruined villages, forests stripped bare, rivers choked with ash. Every

town looked like the last — windows gaping like mouths, children too thin for sound. The land bore no banners, no relief. Only the weight of enduring.

When at last he crossed the old stone bridge into the province of his birth, the snows had come again. The trees stood tall and skeletal, draped in white. Yaroslavl rose in the distance like a memory preserved in wax — spires, smoke, the faint gleam of onion domes dulled by winter light.

It was unchanged.

The houses still bore the same sharp roofs. The same iron gates, the same cobbled streets. The pale light still fell at the same angle across the wooden beams of his family's estate.

But as he stepped from the cart, boot hitting frozen earth with a limp that would never leave him, he knew it with a certainty deeper than words:

He was not the same.

The land had not moved, but something in him had shifted beyond reach — not shattered, not lost, but reshaped in silence.

He stood before the house where clocks once ticked in every room, and he no longer knew the hour.

Peace had come. But it had no face. No shape.

Only the echo of what had been, and the space left by what could no longer return.

The door groaned as he opened it, slower than he remembered, the hinges rusted stiff from years of disuse. Inside, the air was dry and bitter with dust, like breath held too long. No fire had been lit in months — perhaps years. The scent of pine wax and coal had faded, replaced by cold wood and the soft must of forgotten corners.

Matvey stepped over the threshold like one entering a tomb, not a home.

The floorboards creaked beneath his boot, the sound startling in its intimacy. He moved through the front hall, past the portraits that still hung in solemn order: officers in medals, saints in gold-leaf halos, ancestors whose eyes held the same judgment they always had. The glass over their faces was smeared with time.

He paused before the iron stove. It had not ticked in years. Dust layered its top like frost. No one had stirred its belly for warmth, no coal shoveled, no flame tended. He touched it once, and then kept walking.

In the sitting room, the old chair stood near the window, untouched — his father's chair, where silence had once sat like a second man. The cushion had sunken with age. The embroidery was faded where his father's hand had rested day after day. Matvey stared at it a long while, but did not sit.

He turned instead toward the stairs, climbing slowly, his side aching with every step. The bannister still bore the nick he had carved into it as a boy. His fingers brushed it as he passed.

Upstairs, the rooms were quiet as sealed boxes. The door to his mother's chamber hung ajar. He stepped inside.

Her scarf still hung from the hook by the bed — blue, thin, stitched with tiny white flowers. The fabric had gathered dust, but not weight. It still moved faintly when he passed, as if waiting.

He reached out, gently touched the edge of it. For a moment, the memory of her hands returned — folding laundry, brushing snow from his hair, setting bread on the table without words.

But the room did not speak. It only watched.

"You have not changed," he thought. "Only waited."

And in that waiting, something broke and did not shatter.

He stood in the stillness, hearing no clocks, feeling no warmth, and understood fully now — peace was not what came after war.

It was what remained when everything else had gone.

The study was colder than the rest of the house. Matvey pushed open the heavy wooden door with effort, its edges catching on the warped frame. The room smelled of old paper and dried ink, of age held tight in drawers and forgotten between bindings. The curtains were drawn, letting in only a dull, gray light that lay flat across the floor.

He stepped inside and let his hand trail along the desk — lacquered wood, dark as river ice, its edges worn smooth from decades of elbows, writing, silence. The inkstand was still there, capped, dry. A quill lay beside it, its point dulled and splayed.

He moved toward the shelves, where books stood like soldiers long dismissed. Leather spines cracked with time. Gold-lettered titles faded, dusty with memory. He ran his finger along one — *Military Doctrine of the Imperial Officer* — untouched since his childhood. He remembered watching his grandfather read it with a finger tapping along the lines, lips moving silently.

He pulled a smaller volume from the middle shelf. The leather binding creaked. *Reflections on Order and Will* — a book he had not dared open as a boy, its pages too dense, its meanings too vast. Now he opened it without hesitation, turning the first brittle leaf, then the next.

Inside, between the pages, something slid free — a folded note, old and pressed flat, yellowed at the edges. The handwriting was sharp, deliberate. Familiar.

It was his grandfather's.

“To serve is to vanish.”

Just those five words.

No signature. No date.

He stood still, holding the paper between forefinger and thumb, the script quivering slightly as his breath stirred it. He read the line again. And again.

“To serve is to vanish.”

Not to conquer. Not to command. Not to shine.

To vanish.

He closed the book slowly, the note still in his hand, and sat on the edge of the armchair nearby — cracked leather, its seams split, the seat cold.

Outside the window, snow fell without wind, a slow descent without urgency.

And inside the stillness of that room, the words lingered louder than any order ever shouted:

“To serve is to vanish.”

And he wondered now, after all the blood, the silence, the pain and letters written without reply — if that vanishing had already begun.

Night came without drama, the kind of winter dusk that drifts in unnoticed, settling in corners and crevices like dust returned to dust. The rooms remained dark. He lit no lamps. Let the shadows have their old dominion.

Matvey stood at the foot of the stairs for a long time, listening to the silence as one might listen to a distant river — not for meaning, but for proof of its presence. The house breathed faintly, the wood creaking now and then as if remembering footsteps long gone.

He did not undress.

His uniform hung on him like bark on a dead tree — stiff, patched, bearing the wear of mud, salt, blood, and time. The buttons were dulled, the wool worn thin at the cuffs. His boots were cracked, soles soft from years of march and frost, but he left them on.

To remove it would have felt like shedding more than cloth. It would be an admission — that the war had ended in him too. That he could return fully. That he was someone before, and might be again.

But that person, he no longer knew.

He spread no bedding. Made no fire. He cleared a space in the study by the cold hearth and lowered himself slowly, the wound in his side whispering reminders as he settled onto the wooden floorboards.

Beside him, he laid his sword.

The same one he had drawn and sheathed, drawn and sheathed, again and again in campaigns and marches, in orders obeyed and questions unspoken. The hilt worn smooth by his palm. The blade unshined, but clean. It had killed, yes. But more often, it had simply waited.

As it did now.

He rested one hand on the scabbard and closed his eyes.

Sleep did not come easily, but it came — not from peace, but from exhaustion, from the stillness that follows after a man has given all he has and is not yet asked for more.

And so Matvey slept, not in the comfort of return, but in the posture of one who still listened for the next command.

Uniform on. Sword beside. Name unspoken. And the silence — not empty, but whole.

Morning bled slowly into the house, thin light slipping through the cracks in the shutters, drawing pale lines across the floorboards where Matvey still lay. He rose stiffly, muscles slow to obey, the ache in his side pulsing like a dull bell. The house was as he had left it — mute, unmoved by his presence. The silence felt older now, not indifferent, but final.

He made no tea. He lit no stove.

Instead, he reached for his notebook, the same worn pages that had carried his thoughts across provinces, across years, across blood. He sat beside the hearth, sword still beside him, and let his hand begin to move — slower now, but steady.

I did not return. Only the body did. The son still marches.

He paused, the nib hovering over the page.

They see me in the town and nod. They say "welcome back" with voices that don't know where I've been. They don't see that the boots I wear are still laced for war, that my hands still curl as if expecting to carry another dying man, that my eyes no longer search for faces but for signs — of frost, of movement, of order.

Peace is a room too quiet to sleep in.

My grandfather's chair is still empty.

My mother's scarf still waits for hands that are no longer hers.

And I, still in uniform, carry the silence like a wound deeper than shrapnel.

He set the pen down. No signature this time.

He leaned back against the cold stone of the hearth, eyes half-closed, not in sleep, but in that strange stillness that comes when the soul has moved farther than the body can follow.

Outside, the snow continued to fall, soft and indifferent.

And inside, the son of Russia — broken, silent, faithful — still marched.

The Children of the Soil

The thaw came slow that year. By the time the rivers cracked open and the snow withdrew into the black veins of the land, Matvey had begun to walk again — not out of duty, but out of a strange, restless pull. He left the house each morning with his sword still slung over his shoulder, though he no longer reached for it, and wandered the muddy roads that led through birch woods and broken fields into the neighboring villages.

He did not come to instruct, nor to be recognized. Most did not know his name. Some called him the quiet officer, others simply sir. He never corrected them.

He would enter the village square at midmorning, stand near the well or the churchyard or the market stalls that no longer sold anything but turnips and salt, and wait. The people, cautious at first, soon grew used to his silence. The children pointed, the dogs barked once, then forgot him. In time, some invited him in. Not for questions — just for presence.

He saw hunger there — real, gnawing hunger that didn’t cry out, only stared back with hollow eyes. He saw infants swaddled in rough linen, suckling with more will than strength. He saw grandmothers boiling bone broth over firepits dug into earthen floors, scraping every edge of survival.

But he also saw laughter.

Laughter rising over nothing — a rooster that escaped the coop, a boy slipping in the muck, a girl pulling her braid like a battle cry. Laughter without bitterness, born not from ease, but from endurance. From the simple defiance of still being alive.

He did not ask their stories. He only listened. A mother spoke of her husband's legs gone to frost. A farmer told of bandits stealing seed grain, of the miracle of one barley stalk that lived. A child said he had seen a star fall into the woods and wanted to catch it in a jar.

Matvey nodded. Sometimes he stayed for tea if offered, thin and bitter, but warm. He sat on wooden stools, ate hard bread, let his hands rest on his knees.

He looked into faces carved by wind and toil, faces that had not worn medals, had not spoken to generals, had not written to Russia — yet bore its weight just the same.

And in their silence, he began to hear something older than command.

He did not yet know what it meant.

But it was the first time since the war that the voice in his chest did not echo back alone.

Spring pressed gently into the earth, and Matvey kept walking. His limp had lessened but never vanished; he moved like a man used to weight, whether it was still there or not. The villagers no longer watched him with suspicion — they simply made space. He became a fixture, like the smoke from the chimneys or the creak of the well's bucket rope.

One morning, as the frost clung in shadowed corners, a boy sat near the chapel steps with a torn primer balanced on his knees. He was tracing the Cyrillic letters with a grimace of confusion, tongue pressed between his teeth. Matvey crouched beside him without a word. The boy looked up, uncertain.

“Which one is this?” the boy asked, pointing to a curved shape.

“Э,” Matvey said softly. “It sounds like the start of ‘echo.’”

The boy nodded, though Matvey doubted he knew the word.

Each morning that week, the boy waited for him. They sat side by side on the stone steps, boots in the mud, and traced the faded letters together. Matvey spoke simply. He did not explain grammar or philosophy. He taught by breath, by repetition, by presence. The boy learned slowly, stubbornly.

In the afternoon of that same week, he came upon a girl digging beside her family’s hut. The goat lay still nearby, stiff and blank-eyed. Her hands were red with dirt. The shovel was a broken piece of fence rail. Her father was gone, her brothers off with conscripts. She did not cry, only worked.

He approached and took the rail from her hands. She did not protest.

Together, they dug a shallow grave behind the hut, beneath a crooked plum tree that had never bloomed. When it was finished, she laid the animal down gently and whispered something too soft to catch.

He stayed only long enough to pack the dirt again.

She looked at him once, squinting through hair and sunlight. “Are you a priest?”

“No.”

“A soldier?”

He paused, then answered, “I was.”

She nodded as if this explained everything and nothing.

He walked away without asking her name.

They never asked his. He never offered it.

He wore no insignia, bore no decoration. He was just a man in a coat, a limp, a voice that spoke little but stayed when it mattered.

And in that namelessness, he began to feel closer to something true.

The houses were not houses in the way cities understood them. They were bodies of wood and soot and breath, pieced together over generations with axe, nail, and quiet devotion. Matvey walked through them as one might walk through memory — gently, without haste, listening to what did not ask to be seen.

Inside, each hut was warmed by the belly of a stove, thick and whitewashed, built of brick and smoke. Children slept near it in winter, curling around its heat like cats. Pots hung from hooks above, steaming faintly with stews of bone and cabbage. The air smelled of rye, sweat, and ash.

In every home, there was an icon corner — the *krasny ugol*, always facing east. Faded paintings of saints looked down from crooked shelves, some behind glass, others barely more than wood boards kissed smooth by generations of lips. A candle, or even a splinter of wax stuck in a bottle, flickered beneath them. Mothers crossed themselves in silence as they passed.

Windows were patched with cloth, leather, even paper. One house had a pane replaced by a shard of bottle glass, turning the sunlight green. No symmetry, no plan — just function, just survival.

He watched women mend shirts by candlelight, the flame's glow painting gold across their tired faces. Their needles moved without pause, as if guided by muscle memory older than speech. A child beside one traced letters in flour dust on the table, whispering them to herself.

In one home, the ceiling sagged. In another, a chicken had taken up residence in the hallway. Now and then, a goat bleated from under a bed. Nothing was clean in the courtly sense. But everything was whole.

And as Matvey sat on a low stool, knees bent, steam from a chipped tea glass rising in his hands, he saw something that had evaded him all his life.

Not power. Not purpose. But presence.

He had stood in court halls of polished stone. He had marched beneath banners and chandeliers. He had spoken to men whose names were written in gilded ink.

But he had never seen Russia like this.

Here, in smoke-blackened walls and flickering saints, in patched coats and broken lullabies, in the quiet nod of a woman offering half her supper without a word — here was the breath of the country, unrecorded, unadorned.

And in that breath, he saw a truth no order could command.

The path wound through birch and pine, narrow and worn, just wide enough for a cart's axle, though none had passed in weeks. The snow had long melted, but the mud lingered in low

places. Spring grasses crept along the edges, softening the way, but the trees still stood as sentinels — tall, silent, indifferent.

Matvey walked alone.

No sword this time. No pack, no notebook. Just his coat, his breath, and the steady rhythm of his boots pressing into earth. The forest did not ask who he was. It did not remember medals or wounds. It had seen a thousand men pass and vanish, and would see a thousand more.

Above him, the canopy filtered the sun into scattered light. Birds called from deep within the green. Somewhere to the east, a brook moved through the underbrush, speaking in tones too old for human tongue.

He paused by a fallen trunk where moss had grown thick, its softness in defiance of war or time. A broken branch hung above, its bark stripped by wind, white and raw like bone.

Matvey touched it gently, then let his hand fall.

The stillness settled around him, not like a weight, but like a presence.

He looked up between the trees, sky barely visible, and exhaled a breath he hadn't known he was holding.

"Father," he whispered.

The word did not echo.

It did not need to.

"I am still here."

Not asking. Not claiming. Just stating.

A soldier's report, not to command, but to the silence that had never answered him — whether in trench or field, in page or prayer, in blood or snow or dream.

He closed his eyes, listened once more to the rustle of leaves, and waited.

But no voice came.

Only the forest, unchanged and ancient, breathing around him.

And that, at last, was enough.

He stood beneath a pine whose roots clawed through stone, and he felt the earth press back against the soles of his boots. It was damp, rich, alive — not with glory, not with story, but with slow, enduring life. A crow passed overhead, its shadow brushing the forest floor like a fleeting thought.

Matvey did not move.

“You are not in the generals,” he thought. “They spoke your name with medals on their chests, but they did not carry you. They carried their rank.”

A breeze stirred the branches above him, and sunlight shimmered briefly on a patch of lichen like a silent nod.

“You are not in the cathedrals,” he continued. “Stone domes rise toward heaven, but your voice does not come from gold or chant. It comes from the soil — damp, dark, hidden.”

He stepped off the path, down into the wild tangle of undergrowth, where the moss grew thick and the ground remembered the footprints of animals more ancient than empire.

“You are not in children,” he thought with sorrow, “though we speak of you as inheritance. You do not pass like blood. You are breathed in, soaked through, rooted.”

He placed a hand on a tree trunk, rough beneath his fingers. The bark was flaking. A trail of ants moved in silence along its seam.

“You are in the earth,” he said inwardly, “in water, in trees, in rivers, in fields where no banners fly.”

The words were not prayer. Not poetry. They were the simple recognition of presence.

“You are a soul,” he thought. “Not of men. Not of language. But of place.”

And for the first time, in that quiet, green cathedral of wind and wood, Matvey felt the answer he had never received in battle, nor in letters, nor in wounds.

Not in words.

But in stillness.

The kind of stillness that holds the weight of everything and asks for nothing.

The Voice in the Wind

The seasons turned, as they always had, and Matvey remained. His walks grew longer, his speech shorter. He no longer lingered at village thresholds nor stayed for tea when offered. The children waved still, but from a distance. He returned the gesture with a nod and a faint curve of the lips, then walked on, eyes always moving toward the horizon, as if waiting for something beyond the ridge.

The people began to speak of him not with curiosity, but with a quiet sort of reverence, the kind reserved for those who live on the edge of the visible world. They called him the watcher. Not in mockery, not in fear — but in the way one names a stone that has stood in the same field longer than memory.

“He sees things we don’t,” one woman whispered while kneading dough.

“He speaks with the trees,” said a child, pulling her braid tight.

“He listens more than he breathes,” said an old man, not unkindly.

When men gathered at the smithy or in the square, their voices dropped when they spoke of him. Not from suspicion, but from something older — the way one speaks of the wind in deep winter, or a path that leads into woods too silent for comfort.

No one ever asked him why he walked alone.

No one asked what he had seen, what he had done.

They simply let him pass, and when he did, they felt — though they would never admit it — a quiet shifting in the air, as if something older than war, older than peace, was moving through their fields, leaving no footprints, only stillness.

And Matvey, for his part, did not seek to explain.

He had become less of a man in their eyes, and more of a shape.

A shape that listened.

A shape that endured.

A shape that stood still when the wind began to speak.

He walked before dawn now, when the frost still lay in the hollows and the fields held their breath. The fog curled low across the meadows like smoke that had forgotten its fire. Trees stood as silhouettes, their limbs unmoving, their presence firm. In these early hours, Matvey spoke more than at any other time — but not aloud.

His thoughts moved outward, not inward. Not questions, not memories, but something closer to communion.

*“*You are with me still, Father,” he said silently, watching a flock of birds rise from the reeds, their wings beating like pages turning in a closed book.

He did not mean his father in blood. That man had long since vanished into silence and portraits. He meant something deeper — the voice he had written to in war, the presence he had cursed in fever, the land that had bled him without answer. He meant Russia, but not its borders. Not its crown. He meant the soul he had glimpsed in fields where children ate pages, in trenches soaked with prayers no one heard, in huts where icon candles flickered against frostbitten glass.

Now, as he passed a stream swollen with spring melt, he would pause and listen to its language. Not for prophecy, but for recognition. The water spoke of movement without destination. Of patience. Of time before maps.

“You do not forget,” he thought. “Even if men do.”

He laid a hand on the bark of an elm as if greeting an old comrade. The tree said nothing, but its roots touched the bones of a thousand who had once stood where he did.

The fields were greening again. The fog began to lift.

And in the space between his steps, between the trees, between breath and thought, Matvey felt it:

Not words. Not visions.

But the assurance that he had never truly walked alone.

That the land itself remembered him.

That the voice, quiet now, had only moved into the wind.

It happened near dusk — that strange hour when light thins and the sky forgets its color. Smoke rose sharp over the treeline, black against the gold of fading sun. The bell in the village clanged once, then again, not with ritual, but with urgency.

By the time Matvey reached the edge of the property, half the barn was aflame. Hay and timber hissed beneath the heat, and animals screamed from their stalls. The men were already at the line, passing buckets from the well. Women shouted for the children to stay back. The fire leapt like something alive, devouring rafters in long, crackling gulps.

Matvey said nothing.

He threw off his coat, took up a bucket, and joined the line. His movements were spare, precise, quiet. No panic, no waste. When a beam collapsed, he pulled a boy free from falling ash. When the roof gave, he drove a goat through the fence with a slap and a grunt. When the flames reached the northern wall, he climbed it without thought and helped pull it down before it could spread.

No one asked him to. No one thanked him.

When the fire finally burned out, nothing was left of the barn but smoldering ribs and blackened stone. The family stood in silence, staring. A child cried softly into her mother’s sleeve.

Matvey stood a moment longer in the smoke, hands and face streaked with soot, eyes reflecting flame long extinguished.

Then he turned and walked. Not back toward the village. But into the forest.

He was gone for three days.

No one searched. No one followed.

They had learned by now that his disappearances were not flight, but return — not retreat from life, but descent into something deeper, older, less named.

And in those days, among trees and rivers, no one knew where he slept, what he ate, or what words passed through his mind.

Only that when he came back, he carried the smell of moss and fire, and a silence that said more than comfort ever could.

The forest thickened as he wandered deeper, mist rising from the earth each dawn like breath from sleeping gods. The trees grew close together here, their trunks pale, their roots crossing like veins beneath his boots. The air was heavy with stillness — not silence, but the sound of everything listening.

It was there, in that suspended quiet, that the visions began.

At first, only shapes in the fog — the glint of brass where there should be none, the faint murmur of boots treading where no path lay. Then, clearer: figures in coats like his own, their outlines shifting, their steps soundless. Soldiers without faces. Rifles slung across shoulders that ended in smoke. They stood at the edges of his sight, not approaching, not fading, as though waiting for him to remember their names.

Matvey stopped once and raised his hand toward them. They did not move. The mist moved through them. And then they were gone.

Later, he saw wolves — five of them — standing on a ridge above a frozen stream. Their eyes glowed faintly in the half-light. But they did not run, nor growl, nor flee. They only watched him, tails low, bodies still as carved stone. When he blinked, they too were gone, leaving only paw prints that led nowhere.

He did not fear these things. Nor did he question them. They belonged to the same world he had always walked in — a world that blurred the line between the living and what remained.

At night, by the faint glow of a dying fire, he reached for his notebook, fingers brushing the worn leather cover. He opened it once, looked at the empty page, then closed it again.

There were no more letters to write.

The questions had been asked, the answers given — not in words, but in the quiet persistence of the land itself.

So he sat, back against a tree, breath rising in the mist, watching shadows move like thought through the fog.

He no longer needed the ink.

The earth was already speaking.

He remained in the forest until the first flakes fell, soft as whispers, drifting through the high branches to settle on his shoulders and brow. He did not brush them away. The cold no longer startled him. It came as a familiar companion, an old hand resting on his spine.

At dawn, he walked a path with no end, following nothing but the shifting of light and the language of wind in the boughs. The sky above was low and gray, the world below muffled and slow. His footprints pressed gently into the new snow, and already the trees had begun to reclaim them.

He did not think of war. He did not think of titles, nor land, nor letters never answered. The sword at his side hung light, forgotten. His uniform had faded, patch by patch, until it matched the bark and soil around him.

Matvey paused on a hill where the trees opened briefly and the fields beyond stretched empty, endless, pale with frost. He closed his eyes.

His breath came slow, steady. He heard no voices. No saints. No ghosts.

Only the hush of a land that had always been here, and would always remain, whether men returned home or vanished into silence.

And he knew, at last, that it was enough.

“There are no more questions,” he thought.

“Only breath, and the sound of snow falling.”

The Father of Silence

The snow began before sunrise, fine as flour, drifting without haste across the rooftops and fields, softening the world in quiet increments. No bells rang in the village that day. No smoke rose from the forge. Even the dogs did not bark.

Matvey stepped from his house just as the wind stilled, the frost beneath his boots giving a brittle whisper. His coat, threadbare and patched, bore the wear of years. The seams at his shoulders had frayed where once epaulettes had rested. Now there were no marks. No symbols. Only cloth and breath.

He carried no sword. No rifle. Not even a walking stick.

In one hand, wrapped in a square of linen worn thin as air, he held a small clutch of dark earth — the soil from behind the house in Yaroslavl, gathered days before, taken from beneath the old pine where he once watched the seasons turn as a child. It smelled of pine sap and ash and something older than memory.

He crossed the field alone, leaving faint prints that filled even as he made them. The villagers watched from behind frosted panes, their breath fogging the glass. No one called out. A few bowed their heads. Others simply watched, eyes lowered when he passed.

Matvey did not look back.

The woods opened before him with a familiarity that needed no path. The trees bowed slightly under snow's weight, and the air grew dense with that deep, absolute stillness that only comes in the first true snow of winter. Birds had already fled. The river beneath the ridge had slowed to silence, hidden beneath a thin skin of ice.

He walked deeper, the white gathering on his shoulders like a cloak.

There was no destination. Only the forest. Only the voice that no longer needed to speak.

The woods thickened behind him as though drawing a curtain, each tree a sentinel, each branch bowed not in mourning, but in stillness. Snow clung to the limbs and fell in soft, uneven rhythms, soundless in the deep. The sky had dulled to pewter, holding neither threat nor promise. It simply hung.

Matvey walked until the prints behind him vanished into white, until even his breath no longer steamed into the air — not because of cold, but because the air itself had begun to match his stillness.

He came upon a narrow stream, frozen over. The ice was thin and clear, with brown leaves caught beneath like pressed relics, unmoving. He stepped to the edge and lowered himself slowly, knees to snow, then to earth. He opened the cloth in his hand.

The handful of soil was damp, still clinging to the memory of its home.

He placed it gently at the base of a birch that leaned over the stream like an old priest.

There were no words.

But in his chest, the thought rose unbidden and steady.

"You are with me."

Not above. Not below.

"I do not need to return."

The stream made no sound beneath the ice. Even the forest held its breath.

He lay back onto the moss and snow, head resting between roots that curled like fingers into the frozen ground. His coat settled around him, rising once with his final breath — a slow, full exhale.

His eyes closed. There was no pain. No war. No home.

Only the deepening hush of the woods.

And silence — not emptiness, but presence — gathering around him like a father come at last to sit beside his son.

The snow did not stop for three days. When it cleared, the air was blue with cold and the world was made again — white hills smooth as folded linen, trees outlined in hoarfrost, roofs hidden beneath drifts. In the village, life stirred slowly. Fires were stoked, paths shoveled, but Matvey's door remained closed.

It was the boy who had once learned to read on the chapel steps that came to look for him. Not with alarm, but with a quiet sense that something had passed, like a bell struck from far away. The house was unlocked. Inside, the air was clean and still, cold but not empty. The hearth was swept, the table bare. No coat hung on the hook.

On the desk by the window, beneath a stone, the boy found the journal.

It was bound in cracked leather, edges worn smooth by years of travel, touch, and weather. He lifted it carefully, sat in the chair where no one had sat for weeks, and opened to the first page.

There were no titles. No chapters. Only entries — some dated, most not — each written in a hand that grew steadier with time, even as the words deepened in quiet.

They were addressed not to any man, nor to a god.

They were written to Russia.

Each page a prayer, not of pleading, but of witness.

"You do not speak, but I know your voice."

"I serve not as soldier now, but as breath in your lungs."

"You do not feed us equally, but still we carry your name like a relic."

"You are not the generals. You are not the tsars. You are trees, rivers, land, and silence."

The boy turned the pages slowly, lips moving, not out of habit but reverence.

He read the words as one might listen to wind through branches — not to understand, but to remember.

Outside, snow slid from the roof in one great sigh.

And inside, the boy kept reading, though he did not know the man who had written.

Yet in each line, in each ink-stained breath on the page, he heard something unmistakable.

The voice of someone who had spoken to the land itself — and had been heard.

Matvey walked with no satchel, only the old coat over his shoulders and the stillness in his chest. The first light of morning filtered through the birches like a quiet blessing, their white trunks rising in solemn ranks on either side of the path. The wind moved softly among them, and the birds sang — not with brilliance, but with the slow, even music of a land that had never needed names.

He followed the narrow trail into the woods, deeper than he had gone before. The trees grew closer, the songs of the birds growing fainter with each step. The path thinned, twisted, disappeared. Soon there was no path at all — only the scent of frozen moss, the rustle of fallen leaves, and the sound of his own breath.

The forest floor darkened. The ground softened. Water pooled between roots like forgotten eyes. When he stepped forward again, it soaked through his boots. He did not turn back.

The birches faded into black alder and crooked willow. The birds fell silent. The sky above narrowed to a gray strip barely visible through the canopy. He walked on.

Mud clung to his boots, then to his calves. Time blurred. Hours passed in quiet struggle — one step, then another, until he was wading knee-deep through a bog that whispered around him with each movement. The cold water held no current, no life, only depth. He pressed forward, breath slow, hands reaching to balance himself on rotted stumps and reeds.

Then, suddenly, his foot sank deep — deeper than before.

He pulled. Nothing.

The other foot followed, drawn into the muck like the earth was claiming him. He grunted once, tried to shift his weight. The mud sucked tighter, cold rising to his thighs. He reached for a root, but it broke in his hand. The more he struggled, the faster it took him — the swamp, silent, patient, unyielding.

He stopped.

For a moment, he was still — chest heaving, fingers coated in black silt, eyes lifted to the tangle of branches overhead. No voice answered.

He closed his eyes.

Then the earth pulled again, and he sank — slowly, steadily, without scream or cry. The mud closed over his shoulders, his mouth, his eyes. The sound of gurgling and last breath of air filled the surroundings. Until there was nothing left of the man.

A bird landed on a branch above, alone, and let out one soft, clear note into the still air.

The swamp rippled once, then went still.

Silence.